

PIETIST PREACHING FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH:  
HISTORIC GERMAN PIETISM IN A NEW ENGLAND CHURCH

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To my wife Cortney

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis-project studies the effect of preaching with the theological emphases of Historic Pietism, with the hypothesis that Pietistic preaching will improve spiritual maturity. The author gave his congregation a pretest congregational health assessment, followed by a six-month experiment period wherein each sermon emphasized a Pietistic theological theme, and then a posttest using the same assessment. Inferring from the comparison of congregational health scores, spiritual maturity improved over the test period. Pietism is a valuable tool for preachers looking to grow their congregation in spiritual maturity.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

Preaching holds an honored place in Christian history and in modern churches. It is a mainstay of our worship services, and rightfully so. Proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God was Jesus' primary activity throughout his years of ministry. Whether it was through oral teaching or physical miracles, that proclamation was directed toward growing his disciples toward spiritual maturity. Modern preachers are called to do the same thing. Are we successful? Does our preaching produce spiritually mature disciples of Jesus Christ?

#### **Defining Spiritual Maturity**

To be a spiritual mature Christian disciple, one must believe rightly, act rightly, and hope rightly, as defined by Scripture. August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) offers this brief yet compelling vision of the spiritual maturity toward which we are aiming. Francke was a member of a German Lutheran ecclesial and theological movement called Pietism, which I will describe in detail in Chapter 2. The movement was born out of the desire to produce true, mature disciples of Jesus. With a simplicity that is a hallmark of Pietism, Francke described this mature disciple, saying, “Quite simply remember you would 1. believe, 2. do, 3. hope what is taught, commanded, and promised in Scripture.”<sup>1</sup> Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, writing in *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys: The Christian Ethic of Pietism*, expands on this and says, “Francke called for Christians to remember three things — to believe what Scripture teaches, do what Scripture commands, and hope what Scripture promises.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys: The Christian Ethic of Pietism* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 90.

<sup>2</sup> Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 20.

The Christian disciple who believes, acts, and hopes according to Scripture is a helpful way of marking spiritual maturity. As Pietists define it, these true disciples firmly grasp core Christian Theology, particularly around salvation and sanctification: conversion, regeneration, and transformation. Mature disciples understand that the Christian life is one of action and take practical steps to do what God has for them to do. There is an essential congruence and integrity between what they believe and what they do. Hope guides those Christians and orients their work toward fulfilling God's good desires by improving the lives and circumstances of their neighbors.

Hope may seem like an odd third element to spiritual maturity. There are, after all, many Christian virtues that one might pick to be a defining characteristic such as charity or generosity. Hope, however, acts as a fundamental orientation and rationale for other virtues. Eschatology shows that God will one day set the world aright, condemning and eliminating evil while restoring good (Revelation 19-21). Knowing and understanding this gives the mature Christian a fundamental hopefulness about our current situations. As Hebrews 10:23 reminds us, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." In hope, we trust that God will meet our needs, so we give generously. We bind up the broken in the hope that God will heal. We share the ministry of reconciliation in the hope that God will restore peace and unity. Things do not need to remain as they are, and hope opens us to the possibility of that growth, both individually and in the world.

This three-fold definition of spiritual maturity strikes a helpful balance between details and generalities. Evan Howard, writing in *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, describes spiritual maturity as "conformity with Christ." He says that "our aim is simply *increase* — growth in mature likeness to Christ one step at a time."<sup>3</sup> Other theologians talk about "union

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3 Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Brazos Press, 2008), 295.

with Christ” as the ultimate aim.<sup>4</sup> This language certainly is true, but perhaps too general. It does not describe how the union affects the person, nor suggest how this process happens. There are no proposed guidelines for how to understand spiritual maturity.

Other definitions are more helpful yet stop short of describing real spiritual maturity. For example, take Dave Kinnaman and Mark Matlock’s definition of a spiritually mature “resilient disciple” from their book *Faith for Exiles*. Resilient disciples are “Christ followers who (1) attend church at least monthly and engage with their churches more than just attending worship services; (2) trust firmly in the authority of the Bible; (3) are committed to Jesus personally and affirm he was crucified and raised from the dead to conquer sin and death; and (4) express a desire to transform the broader society as an outcome of their faith.”<sup>5</sup> This definition comes from their research of young Christians who continue in the faith and in the church, and it is generally helpful. Their four categories are closely aligned with Francke’s three areas of right belief, action, and hope, and cites Scripture as an essential element. However, Kinnaman and Matlock’s description is too narrow to fully describe continued life of spiritual maturity. Active church participation, submission to Biblical authority, saving faith in the work of Jesus, and a missional outlook summarize an excellent starting point. The disciples they are describing, as their research shows, are more spiritually mature than others in the Church. Our definition of spiritual maturity shows the way forward. There are more essential beliefs, more right actions, and a deeper missional understanding available for those who pursue spiritual maturity. Francke’s three elements of spiritual maturity, right belief, action, and hope, offer us a

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<sup>4</sup> See Gerald Bray, *God is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Crossway, 2012), 648; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Baker Academic, 2013), 896.

<sup>5</sup> David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Baker Books, 2019), 221-22.

guide that is not too strict and not too loose. It provides a Biblical pathway to follow as we work with the Holy Spirit to grow in Christlikeness.

As Francke and the Pietist movement understood these three areas of spiritual maturity, they must interact. To be truly mature disciples, we cannot only believe, but must also act. Likewise, actions without the proper beliefs supporting them are fruitless. A truly Christian hope must infuse all that we think and do. This element of interaction and mutual support is difficult to convey in any attempt at a definition of spiritual maturity but is an essential element in producing truly mature Christians.

The task of producing this kind of disciple has become even more challenging in recent decades. I will expound that claim below, where we will see startling statistics that suggest that preachers, and the Church in general, are not as effective as we could and should be at this task. We can see the lack of spiritual maturity as many American Christians fundamentally redefine what it means to be a Christian. This plays out most obviously in a decline in Sunday worship service attendance, but in other key areas as well. Our culture seems to be running away from the church, taking many of our members with it. However, the numbers only tell part of the story. Underneath the statistics, we will discover a reason to hope, an opportunity for preachers to rise to meet the challenge of producing spiritually mature disciples in our current context.

As we seek to meet that challenge, there may be help from a theological and ecclesiological movement called Pietism. Also called Historic Pietism, Lutheran Pietism, or German Pietism, this 17th Century movement may have much to teach us. While they may not have had the declining attendance numbers that we are faced with, they came out of a church that struggled to produce spiritually mature disciples and were, in some cases, indifferent to the very

idea. Yet, the Pietists sparked a resurgence of heartfelt, committed disciples. This thesis-project will examine the potential of Pietism for the modern preacher.

### **The Problem**

The landscape of American Christianity has changed, in some cases dramatically so. These changes have been coming for a long time and have been well documented over the decades. It appears that there is a tide moving away from the Church that has picked up speed and shows little signs of stopping. We will look at statistics for just the United States in this thesis-project, and we'll see a sobering picture of the reality that the Church has struggled to produce spiritually mature, highly committed disciples in the face of cultural pressure.

Our struggle to produce committed disciples becomes clear in the statistics. Kinnaman and Matlock describe the problem and a failure to produce “resilient disciples.” In their research, they found only 10% of young Christians in America qualify. That percentage is not of all young people in America, but rather only 10% of those who identify as Christians show signs of a vibrant, robust faith.<sup>6</sup> The Barna Research Group prefers the term “practicing Christian.” Practicing Christians are those who “identify as Christian, agree strongly that faith is very important in their lives, and have attended church within the past month.”<sup>7</sup> They found about one in four (25%) of Americans meet those criteria, a number that is almost in half what it was in 2000.

The problem, then, is clear: we have not risen well to meet the challenges of a changed religious landscape in the United States. We will take a more in-depth look at the issue below. Our ineffective means of sparking spiritual growth has resulted in many Christians either falling

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<sup>6</sup> Kinnaman and Matlock, *Faith for Exiles*, 31. Their research focused on people 18 to 29 years old.

<sup>7</sup> Barna Research Group, “Signs of Decline & Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith,” *The State of the Church*, 2020, accessed June 19, 2022, 2022. <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/>.

away from the faith or changing what it means to be a Christian away from the standards of spiritual maturity mentioned above. However, there is reason for hope. As we will see, a remnant of committed disciples exists in our churches, people ready to be challenged and grown into truly mature disciples of Jesus Christ.

### **Ministry Setting**

I have noticed these trends within my congregation. I serve as the Associate Pastor of Youth and Congregational Life at the Evangelical Covenant Church of Attleboro, Massachusetts. Founded in 1903, our church has 321 formal members, which is large for our area of the country, though makes us mid-sized within our denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Church.<sup>8</sup> While our membership roster lists 321 members, on a regular Sunday we have far fewer congregants in worship. In 2019, we averaged 110 people in worship on a Sunday morning. Recently, in the spring of 2022, following two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen only 50. This is true in our denomination, as well, where attendance dropped 31% during the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Locally, our Children's Sunday school has dropped from the 25 or so down to 5. Our youth ministries fell from 30 to 6. We are an aging congregation, with more retired members than young adults, and few young families or young professionals involved regularly. Overall, we feel keenly the cultural move away from regular church attendance and other traditional forms of discipleship, such as volunteerism within our congregation. These are often considered indicators of spiritual maturity, which suggests we have room to grow.

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<sup>8</sup> Numbers as of December 31, 2022. Our congregation uses the denomination's name. I'll refer to my local church as "ECC Attleboro" and the denomination as "the ECC" or "the Covenant Church."

<sup>9</sup> Bob Smietana, "For a Small Chicago Church, Closing Down Was an Act of Faith," 2022, accessed September 3, 2022, <https://religionnews.com/2022/08/30/go-with-grace/>.

The population of Attleboro, on the other hand, is an interesting contrast to our church. Where our church is declining in numbers, Attleboro is growing, particularly with young families. The city had a population of 45,237 in 2019, growing by 7.5% since 2000.<sup>10</sup> The median age of its residents is 41.5, with a median annual income of \$76,380. In the 10 towns that make up our county, 52.2% of the population identified as Catholic, less than 7% were Protestant, and nearly 40% self-identified as “none” or “no religion.”<sup>11</sup>

Given our church’s declining numbers and our area’s religious make-up, we are in line with the research on religion and spirituality in America. Our congregation is shrinking despite overall population growth in the area. More people are opting to not select a religion on census forms, either to leave organized religion behind altogether or to pursue a private spirituality.

Anecdotally, I have felt this trend in my youth ministries with factors in addition to just the number of attendees. The students in the church who regularly attend ministry events are coming with less and less Biblical knowledge or spiritual awareness. There is a deepening divide between people’s “church lives” and “work lives,” which goes for adults and youth alike. I have spoken with several parents, both inside and outside our congregation, who tell me they want their children to be exposed to “good moral teaching” as a way of offering a variety of religious and spiritual experiences. Young people are expected to get to know the religious landscape and then decide on their religious and spiritual lives with little to no input from parents.

Despite these trends of downward attendance and increasing secularization, there have been some notably positive movements at ECC Attleboro. We have seen an increase in financial

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10 “Attleboro, Massachusetts Profile,” accessed September 26, 2022, 2022. <http://www.city-data.com/city/Attleboro-Massachusetts.html>.

11 “Congregational Membership,” accessed September 28, 2022, 2022. <https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?y=2010&y2=0&t=0&c=25005#CHART>. Data is from 2010 and is the most recent I could find.



giving to our congregation, resulting in an increase of 8% to our annual budget for the 2022 calendar year. We added two new small groups, both meeting online, to our roster of 6 groups. Not only that, but we also recently launched three ministries, all reaching out to the homeless or at-risk populations, with around 30 new volunteers giving of their time.

This speaks to a truth underneath the statistics. Undoubtably, the Church has shrunk in recent decades, and that tide shows no sign of returning. However, as we'll see below, it appears that those who weathered the cultural rip-current flowing away from the church and who stayed connected through the pandemic possess more mature faith. Those in the pews or watching online week after week give of their treasure and time. We have a remnant of committed Christians in our local congregation who believe, do, and hope rightly. The potential exists to capitalize on the opportunity to create many more true Christians despite (or perhaps because of) the lesser numbers.

### **Analysis of the Problem – Changing Definitions**

To understand our shared ministry context in greater detail, let us turn to the numbers and statistics describing the shift away from spiritual maturity in the American Church. Lydia Saad, writing for Gallup, says there is no single reason why people are moving away from the church. She writes, “There is no overarching reason why former churchgoers no longer attend. Preferring to worship on one’s own tops the list at 44%, and just over a third say not liking organized religion is a major factor. These suggest not an antipathy to religion per se so much as a dislike of the group format.”<sup>12</sup> Modern American Christians are not, as some have proposed, automatically disassociating from religion, but instead are changing the fundamental definition

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<sup>12</sup> Lydia Saad, “Sermon Content is What Appeals Most to Churchgoers,” 2017, accessed August 31, 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/208529/sermon-content-appeals-churchgoers.aspx>.

of what it means to be a practicing Christian, the beliefs, actions, and hopes defined by Scripture. We see this shift specifically in the areas of attendance and membership, the practices of the faith, and discipleship in spiritual growth. These changes culminate in a relatively new yet rapidly growing self-identification, “spiritual but not religious.”

### **Dropping Attendance and Membership**

One of the simplest ways to track the overall health of the Church and maturity of its members is through weekly attendance numbers. Activity in a church is one of the pathways that Christians grow toward spiritual maturity. By not neglecting to meet, we encourage each other toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:25). We need that encouragement and comradery to progress in our discipleship, growing toward maturity (Ephesians 4:11-16). Regular attendance means a disciple has the option of engaging in the Body and declining numbers indicate fewer disciples are growing in spiritual maturity in this essential pathway.

While the story is always more complex than mere numbers show, as we will see, the statistics are striking. Walter Sundberg published an analysis of religious trends through the 20th Century and noted that mainline denominations have been declining since the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> Those denominations have dropped between 3% and a startling 51%. Rick Richardson showed similar trends in his book *You Found Me*. He looked at statistical data from 2016 to 2018 and saw among all Protestant churches, including mainline and Evangelical groups, 59% were plateaued or

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Sundberg, “Religious Trends in Twentieth-Century America.” *Word & World* XX, no. 1 (2000): 23. Sundberg defines “Mainline churches” as these eight denominations: “American Baptist Churches in the USA, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church”.

declining in attendance.<sup>14</sup> When you include non-Protestant churches, 80% are plateaued or declining.

Declining attendance in American churches is coupled with a decline in formal membership. Jeffrey M. Jones, writing in 2021, notes, “In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999.”<sup>15</sup> This decline, he claims, is rooted primarily in the rapid decrease in Americans expressing any religious preference at all. Fewer Americans are identifying themselves with a particular religion, and so fewer are committing to formal membership in a religious organization. He writes, “Between 1998 and 2000, an average of 73% of religious Americans belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque. Over the past three years, the average has fallen to 60%.”<sup>16</sup>

Both declining attendance and declining membership correlate strongly with age. Each generation from those born before 1946, to baby boomers, to Gen X, to Millennials show a decrease in membership.<sup>17</sup> *Faith for Exiles* looks at this generation trend, studying the reasons why young adults (Millennials and Gen Z) have left the church. They note, “Today, nearly two-thirds of all young adults who were once regular churchgoers have dropped out at one time or another (64 percent).”<sup>18</sup> Younger generations are not joining religious institutions or are leaving and not returning at higher rates than ever before.

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14 Rick Richardson, *You Found Me: New Research on How Unchurched Nones, Millennials, and Irreligious Are Surprisingly Open to Christian Faith* (IVP Books, 2019), 7.

15 Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” 2021, accessed August 25, 2022, 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

16 Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time”.

17 Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time”.

18 Kinnaman and Matlock, *Faith for Exiles*, 15.

### *COVID-19 Pandemic*

The trend of dropping attendance was exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which hit the United States in force starting in March 2020. While in-person church attendance was difficult, risky, and, in some places, banned, churches pivoted to online worship services. When taken together, Pew Research found that online and in-person attendance grew steadily from July 2020, four months after the pandemic took hold in the U.S., to September 2021, but then plateaued. Twenty-seven percent of the population reported attending a religious service within the last month in-person, while 30% say they watched online, an encouraging sign for continued recovery.<sup>19</sup> However, Pew found that churches returning to normal, in-person operations in 2022 has not meant in an increase in people attending those services. Overall, Pew discovered a decrease in attendance of about 12% since the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>20</sup>

Young people were hit hard by the pandemic. Springtide noted this in *The State of Religion and Young People*:

Nearly 1 in 5 young people (18%) told Springtide they lost the practice of attending religious or spiritual services during the pandemic, and about the same percentage of respondents (20%) said they were happy that this connection was lost. Though nearly half of young people say they watched at least one religious or spiritual service online (44%), very few young people say they found joy (13%) or hope (14%) in these services. Just 12% say they hope virtual services continue after the pandemic.<sup>21</sup>

With so many churches making the pivot to “virtual” worship services, we will be grappling with the effects of online church for a long time. Does a congregant who only watches

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19 Justin Nortey, “More Houses of Worship Are Returning to Normal Operations, But in-Person Attendance is Unchanged Since Fall,” 2022, accessed August 24, 2022, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall/>.

20 Nortey, “More Houses of Worship”.

21 Springtide Research Institute, “The State of Religion and Young People,” 2021, accessed September 11, 2022. <https://springtideresearch.org/the-state-of-religion-2021-digital-edition/?page=1>: 24.

the service online still “attend” the church? I know many in my congregation who would answer “yes.” I also know many who attend only three or four times a year, but they still consider our church to be “their church.” They are redefining what it means to belong to and attend church.

It appears that the pandemic has sped up a decline that has been decades in the making. Jones writes, “While it is possible that part of the decline seen in 2020 was temporary and related to the coronavirus pandemic, continued decline in future decades seems inevitable, given the much lower levels of religiosity and church membership among younger versus older generations of adults.”<sup>22</sup> Church membership and attendance, long a marker of spiritual maturity, is no longer an essential aspect of people’s Christian lives. Let us now turn to the lower levels of religiosity and faith practices.

### **Redefining Faith Practices**

The Barna Research Group has several categories defining different levels of Christian participation in their faith. I used their definition of “practicing Christian” above, but it is helpful to remember here. Practicing Christians, they write, “identify as Christian, agree strongly that faith is very important in their lives and have attended church within the past month.”<sup>23</sup> Failing any of those three categories moves a person to “non-practicing,” which they still define as a Christian, though one who, naturally, is not as engaged in their faith as a practicing Christian. Below that level is considered “non-Christian.” Their research shows a steep decline in practicing Christians, as we have seen. But where did they go? About half went to the “non-practicing” category, and half went to “non-Christian.” Many individuals are not abandoning their faith altogether, but they engage with it in less traditional and less orthodox ways.

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22 Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time”.

23 Barna Research Group, “Signs of Decline & Hope”.

Christians view the Bible as less authoritative than ever before. Kinnaman and Matlock point to our culture's "rampant skepticism... hyperrationalism and pop-culture atheism" which combine to undercut belief in God and trust in scripture. Many young people today "view the Bible as a book of oppression that is harmful to the minds of its devoted readers."<sup>24</sup> Conversely, Bible reading has stayed more-or-less consistent since the early 1990s: around 35% of U.S. adults read their Bible weekly.<sup>25</sup> This indicates that those Christians who have always read their Bibles still read their Bibles and will continue in that spiritual practice, while those who have not been committed to Scripture likely will not start.

Prayer is similarly dropping out of public consciousness. While in 2007, 58% of U.S. adults said they prayed daily, by 2021 that percentage dropped to 45%. About one-third (32%) says they "seldom or never pray," which has increased from 18% in 2007.<sup>26</sup> The drop in occurrences of prayer comes with a decrease in the belief that prayer works. 42% of all Americans say, "God hears prayers and can intervene on a person's behalf." 28% feel that God hears but cannot intervene. 11% say God can do neither. Only 30% of young adults believe God does both.<sup>27</sup>

However, as Gregory A. Smith notes, a strong correlation exists between prayer and religion's importance, a trend that transcends denominational lines. 79% of people who identify as "born-again/evangelical Protestants" say they pray every day, and a similarly large portion say that religion is "very important" in their lives. In contrast, far fewer Protestants who do not

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24 Kinnaman and Matlock, *Faith for Exiles*, 27.

25 Barna Research Group, "Signs of Decline & Hope".

26 Gregory A. Smith, "About Three-in-ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," 2021, accessed August 24, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

27 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Belief in God in U.S. Dips to 81%, a New Low," 2022, accessed September 25, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/393737/belief-god-dips-new-low.aspx>.

identify as born-again or evangelical or those who say they are Catholic pray daily or would say that religion is very important.<sup>28</sup> The more a person of faith prays, the more likely he or she is to prioritize their religion.

## **Discipleship in Spiritual Growth**

Even as the practice of the faith has shifted, the idea of spiritual growth remains important for American Christians. In 2015, Barna published a report called “New Research on The State of Discipleship,” which looked at trends in churches and among Christians regarding spiritual growth.<sup>29</sup> They found that people do want to grow spiritually. 77% of practicing Christians believe it is “very important to see growth in their spiritual life,” and, overall, most Christians are satisfied with their personal spiritual growth. Moreover, these Christians feel that their churches do an excellent job of growing the congregation spiritually. An encouraging sign, but what do these Christians mean by “spiritual growth”?

Barna’s research showed little correlation between a Christian’s perceived spiritual growth and lives of active discipleship. Among self-identified Christians, both practicing and non-practicing, “only 20 percent of Christian adults are involved in some sort of discipleship activity—and this includes a wide range of activities such as attending Sunday school or fellowship group, meeting with a spiritual mentor, studying the Bible with a group, or reading and discussing a Christian book with a group.”<sup>30</sup> Specifically among practicing Christians, less than half are engaged in those kinds of activities. Only 17% said they meet with a spiritual

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28 Smith, “About Three-in-ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated”.

29 Barna Research Group, “New Research on the State of Discipleship,” 2015, accessed September 9, 2022, 2022. <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-on-the-state-of-discipleship>.

30 Barna Research Group, “New Research on the State of Discipleship”.

mentor. These and other traditional and time-honored discipleship practices are falling by the wayside.

Barna also uncovered another shift in the cultural mindset of spiritual growth: many see it as an individual matter, not to be shared or found in a community. Over one-third of respondents said they prefer spiritual growth to be done in private, and 41% said that it is an “entirely private” enterprise. “In other words,” the report states, “one of the problems revealed by this research is that millions of Christians believe that discipleship is a solo affair, with only personal and private implications.”<sup>31</sup> For a large segment of the Christian population in the United States, their discipleship does not and, they believe, should not impact other areas of their lives.

This shift in understanding of discipleship, declining regular attendance at worship services, and changing faith practices come together to reveal a picture of a drop in overall spiritual maturity. People are placing less emphasis on Christian faith practices in their lives, an indication that they are not growing spiritually. This lack of spiritual maturity is well reflected in the self-designation “spiritual but not religious.”

### **Spiritual but not Religious**

Sociologists Clair Grecewica and Michael Lipka, writing for Pew Research, have found a stunning increase in the number of Americans who self-identify as “spiritual but not religious.”<sup>32</sup> To arrive at that particular term, Grecewica and Lipka asked survey respondents whether they considered themselves spiritual and then, on a separate question, religious. The result was an interesting category of people who feel they are spiritual but do not think of themselves as

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31 Barna Research Group, “New Research on the State of Discipleship”.

32 Claire Grecewica and Michael Lipka, “More Americans Now Say They’re Spiritual But Not Religious,” 2017, accessed August 24, 2022, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>. As opposed to “religious and spiritual,” “neither religious nor spiritual,” and “religious but not spiritual.”



religious. Recently, this category jumped from 19% in 2012 to 27% in 2017. The growth can be seen in most demographics: men and women, whites and people of color, young and old, Republicans and Democrats. This increase has come mostly at the expense of the “religious and spiritual” category,” which declined from 59% to 48% in that five-year timespan. The decrease in “religious and spiritual” and subsequent move to “spiritual but not religious” could indicate a lack of spiritual maturity; picking and choosing what one would like out of faith while leaving behind what one dislikes.

Some of those who are spiritual but not religious do not identify with a specific religion. 37% identify as agnostic, atheist, or “nothing in particular.”<sup>33</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, 60% of survey respondents who identified as spiritual but not religious also identified as either Protestant, Catholic, or another faith background, but only 17% said they attend services weekly, a traditional marker of religious activity. Those who consider themselves spiritual but not religious are much more likely to engage their spirituality outside an institution.

This trend is even more pronounced among American youth. Springtide Research found that, while a markedly larger share of youth and young adults are religious, they are staying away from religious institutions at a similar rate. 71% are religious and 78% are spiritual. However, of the young people who identified as “very religious,” less than half (40%) told us they found connecting with their faith community helpful during challenging or uncertain times; only 23% of those who consider themselves moderately religious found this helpful. Only 1 in 5 young people in general agree with the statement, ‘I use faith as a guide when I am confused about

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33 Grecewica and Lipka, “More Americans”.

things.”<sup>34</sup> Less than half (47%) agreed with the statement, “I try hard to carry my religious beliefs over into all my other dealings in life.”<sup>35</sup>

The researchers found a clear disconnect between youth and religious institutions. However, that disconnect hasn't translated into a loss of interest in spirituality or a loss of faith.<sup>36</sup> As Springtide discovered, “Twice as many young people believe in a higher power's existence than doubt it.”<sup>37</sup> They use the term “faith unbundled” to describe how young people are constructing their spirituality from many faiths and traditions. Youth and young adults are still religious, but don't accept the whole “bundle” that comes with being in a specific church or denomination or even a single religion.<sup>38</sup>

Illia Delio, a religious sister and professor of theology writes, “The well-known phrase ‘spiritual but not religious’ captures this emerging (sense of faith), where religion is not a closed system, but an open system that flows into and out of other systems such as science, ecology, socialization, and politics; that is, religion flows through relationships.”<sup>39</sup> Delio is keying into the next generation’s desire to avoid overly rigid constructions of meaning they have often experienced in institutional religion. Instead, they opt for a form of spirituality where meaning is more open and determined by each individual. While youth have led this trend, Grecewica and Lipka identified it in the entire American population. They write, “only 54% of U.S. adults think

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34 Springtide Research Institute, “The State of Religion and Young People”: 21.

35 Springtide Research Institute, “The State of Religion and Young People”: 47.

36 Springtide Research Institute, “The State of Religion and Young People”: 23.

37 Springtide Research Institute, “The State of Religion and Young People”: 46.

38 Springtide Research Institute, “The State of Religion and Young People”: 58.

39 Quoted in Springtide Research Institute, “The State of Religion and Young People”: 62.

of themselves as religious – down 11 points since 2012 – while far more (75%) say they are spiritual, a figure that has remained relatively steady recently.”<sup>40</sup>

Therein lies a key to hope amid this deluge of bad news. It is true that attendance at church has dropped precipitously. It is true that Americans are changing the definition of what it means to be a practicing Christian, as well as many other long-held fixtures of the religion. Those are disheartening realities that show no signs of slowing down. However, it is also true that Americans, Christian and otherwise, are finding meaning and refuge in spirituality. They are not only *looking* for spiritual content, they are *hungry* for it. And we can see other signs of hope as well.

### **Reasons for Hope**

The statistics are real, but there's a deeper reality that offers a real reason to hope for the future of the American church. In *You Found Me*, Rick Richardson describes a reality beyond the numbers. He says that misunderstanding, misapplication, and outright abuse of statistics has caused the American church to develop “Chicken Little Syndrome.”<sup>41</sup> We cry about the sky falling, but we are not actually in terminally dire circumstances. There’s a deeper reality in the world of a readiness or at least openness to spiritual growth that gives room for hope for the future if we can seize this opportunity.

For example, data showing the overall number of Christians in the country dropping doesn't delineate between nominal Christians and committed Christians. In reality, he says, “This decline is overwhelmingly due to [nominal Christians] letting go of identification with the Christian faith.”<sup>42</sup> Nominal Christians, those who rarely participate in discipleship activities but

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40 Grecewica and Lipka, “More Americans”.

41 Richardson, *You Found Me*, 32.

42 Richardson, *You Found Me*, 36.

continue to self-identify as ‘Christian’, are simply dropping that identification. They are leaving the church but are perhaps not leaving it worse off. Richardson writes, “People choosing to be either genuinely committed to Christian faith or else not identify at all clarifies what Christian faith looks like and forces people to make a choice. The loss in numbers but increase in vitality could be a huge plus for the future of Christian congregations in America.”<sup>43</sup>

Barna’s research supports this. Those people that Barna considers “committed Christians” are still in the pews and remain committed to their faith despite the social pressures to leave it. They reiterate Richardson’s conclusion: “Committed Christians are not the ones who are moving away from faith communities; instead, movement is occurring most among those who were only marginally attached to their faith to begin with.”<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, as mentioned above, even though youth and young adults are fleeing traditional institutional churches, a generational pattern may give us hope. Frank Newport, writing for Gallup Polls in 2019, shows how religiosity tends to follow the same pattern in every generation.<sup>45</sup> It plummets at 18 years old, when people leave home and go off on their own. It picks up again, though, around age 30, when most have families and children and want a stable community. Then religiosity continues to rise with age. Given that trend, Gallup is seeing an uptick in the numbers of older Millennials going back to church. “But what we see now suggests that predictions of the forthcoming demise of religion as we know it may be premature,” Newport says. “Broad structural changes in society and culture may well continue to affect

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43 Richardson, *You Found Me*, 41.

44 Barna Research Group, “Signs of Decline & Hope”.

45 Frank Newport, “Millennials’ Religiosity Amidst the Rise of the Nones,” 2019, accessed August 25, 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/267920/millennials-religiosity-amidst-rise-nones.aspx>.

religiosity across all groups, but the big bulge of millennials may actually get more religious as they age.”<sup>46</sup>

The trend of young adults returning to church continues down through the generations as well. Richardson describes “the Nones,” a term describing those who select “none” when asked for their religion on a survey. The Nones are the fastest-growing religious segment in America,<sup>47</sup> but they “are not necessarily antireligious, anti-Christian, or even antichurch. Many are spiritual, and more of them than you might expect are receptive to congregations and faith conversations.”<sup>48</sup> Considering the amount of people leaving the church, this presents a unique opportunity to engage this large segment of the population in Christian spirituality. And their engagement with religion is proving beneficial, something Springtide Research found. “Religious young people,” they discovered, “are faring better than the non-religious in all aspects of their well-being, including when navigating uncertainty.”<sup>49</sup>

I cited a statistic above that only 47% of youth try hard to bring their beliefs into other areas of their lives. In the context of all the other disquieting and discouraging numbers, that could seem small and perhaps an indication of a generation abandoning their faith. We can, however, look at that number another way. *Nearly half* of our youngest generation is working to incorporate faith and faith practices into their lives. This is a good reason to hope, and it presents us an opportunity in the church and specifically for preachers.

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46 Newport, “Millennials’ Religiosity Amidst the Rise of the Nones”.

47 Richardson, *You Found Me*, 1.

48 Richardson, *You Found Me*, 11.

49 Springtide Research Institute, “The State of Religion and Young People”: 10.

## A Preaching Opportunity

Preachers are uniquely situated to navigate this changed landscape to cultivate spiritual growth into maturity. Writing for Gallup in 2017, Lydia Saad analyzed why people who grew up attending church leave.<sup>50</sup> 44% of respondents, the largest segment, said that they prefer to worship on their own. The next largest was 36% who reported that they don't like organized religion. This tracks with the discussion above. More interesting, however, was Saad's investigation into why people *continue* to attend worship. She found that "three in four worshippers noted sermons or talks that either teach about scripture or help people connect religion to their own lives as major factors spurring their attendance."<sup>51</sup> People stay in churches for relevant, Biblical preaching.

At this point in the dramatically changed landscape of American Christianity, we have been reduced to a smaller group of highly committed Christians who deeply care about what they hear from their pastors' sermons. This presents preachers with an incredible opportunity to further disciple willing disciples and a high responsibility to move Christians further along toward Christlikeness in spiritual maturity. The challenge, of course, is to meet the changing culture in our church and the changed culture outside our church through robust preaching that rightly teaches Biblical belief, action, and hope.

This is a challenge that has arisen before in the setting faced by a theological and ecclesiological movement from 17th Century Germany called Pietism. This movement managed to spark a resurgence of committed Christianity in the face of cultural trends away from it. They

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<sup>50</sup> Saad, "Sermon Content is What Appeals Most to Churchgoers".

<sup>51</sup> Saad, "Sermon Content is What Appeals Most to Churchgoers".

carried a similar anti-institutionalism that would feel familiar to today's youth, and still managed to promote intense discipleship. I believe this movement may have much to teach us.

### **Introducing Historic Pietism**

Pietism focused on igniting true faith in Christians. In their 17th Century context, the percentage of the population attending church on a Sunday would have been much higher than ours. Yet, Pietists came up against a similar discouraging reality: the church was not producing spiritually mature disciples of Jesus Christ. Through a high view of Scripture, preaching that emphasized a personal, transformative experience of Jesus, and robust small groups called "conventicles," Pietists sparked true discipleship leading to Christian maturity.<sup>52</sup> Their expression of faith was highly experimental for their day but firmly grounded in their context, enabling them to reach out to the world with new solutions. Pietists managed to instill a vibrant faith in the hearts of a committed few, which in turn sparked a revival of Christian devotion throughout Europe and America.<sup>53</sup> Appendix A shows Pietism's historical context and initial growth.

What is Pietism? Interestingly, as the movement grew, it did not develop into a system of dogmatics or doctrine, but an ethos that fit a wide variety of contexts. Throughout this thesis-project, I will refer to Pietism with a variety of descriptors. I'll call it a movement, an ethos, a set of impulses or emphases, and even a tool we can use. Since Pietism's originators saw themselves

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52 C. John Weborg, "Pietism: 'the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany'." *The Covenant Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1985): <https://gordonconwell.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000943767&site=ehost-live&scope=site> <http://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/index;> 19.

53 Roger E. Olson and Christian T. Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015, 8. The authors refer to Pietism as a "second Reformation," and "*the* most influential spiritual movement since the Reformation, especially in America" (emphasis original).

as bringing renewal and innovating something new, they never codified what counts as “official” Pietism.

Thus, metaphor is the best way to describe what Pietism is. Pietism is like a musical key, a set of chords and notes that allow for a wide variety of expression yet carry an essential unity. A key doesn’t ignore other keys or other notes, and, in fact, a symphony might employ those at certain times. The key might modulate or invert, come in major or minor, be augmented or suspended. Always, though, the piece returns to its key. Pietism is a theological key with a set of Biblical tenets as its essential unity. They are not inventions but are structured in a uniquely Pietist way. A sermon might be preached in a minor key, or a Pietist pastor might modulate the theological tones for a season. Pietism, though, will draw people back to that original key, the Biblical and theological ideas that make up its core. I will explain those tenets in Chapter 2.

### **Thesis**

In this thesis-project, I will research this question: In light of the church’s difficulty in producing spiritually mature disciples, does preaching using Pietistic emphases improve the spiritual maturity of the congregants?

My hypothesis is that preaching with Pietistic emphases will improve the spiritual maturity of my congregation.

### **Definitions**

Several terms are central to this thesis-project. It will be beneficial to have a definition of how I will use each term.

**Spiritual Maturity** – A follower of Jesus Christ who believes rightly, acts rightly, and hopes rightly, as defined, and described by Scripture.



**Discipleship** – The process a committed follower of Jesus moves intentionally through to attain spiritual maturity.

**Sanctification** – The process of an individual becoming more like Jesus Christ, leaving behind sins, and putting on righteous deeds. The Holy Spirit is the primary agent of sanctification, moving the Christian toward holiness. The Christian must also intentionally work alongside and be empowered by the Spirit.

**Regeneration/New Life/Rebirth** – Terms describing the life God implants into a new Christian at the moment of conversion. The *New Dictionary of Theology* describes regeneration as, “the action of God upon the human life which transforms spiritual deadness into a living responsiveness in obedience and love towards him.”<sup>54</sup> At this singular moment, the Christian is passive and receives the gift of new life from God. This new life enables the Christian to actively engage in sanctification and discipleship.

**Pietism** – Also known as “Historic Pietism” or “German Lutheran Pietism.” Pietism was a theological and ecclesiological movement that began in 17th Century Germany. It was a renewal movement within the Lutheran church launched by Philipp Jakob Spener.

**Pietist Emphases or Impulses** – The unique theological emphases within Pietism. Pietism did not produce any doctrinal statements, but rather, through repeated use in their parish preaching, Biblical, and theological teaching, emphasized three areas of Biblical theology. These emphases are (1) right belief, particularly in the area of conversion, regeneration, and transformation/sanctification, (2) right action, specifically a congruence between what we

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<sup>54</sup> Davie, Martin et al., *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic* (InterVarsity Press, 2016), 1569.

believe and what we do, and (3) right hope, eschatologically, that drives social action to improve the lives of our neighbors. Chapter 2 gives a full description of each.

This thesis-project will have five chapters. In this first chapter, we have set the scene. We understand America's changed religious cultural landscape, the church's difficulty in producing spiritually mature disciples, and the opportunity and necessity of preaching well. The second chapter presents a theological framework for preaching and describes Pietism's main theological emphases, how they sparked spiritual maturity, and will offer an original Pietist homiletic. The third chapter is a literature review of relevant material. The fourth chapter describes the project I used to test my hypothesis. Using a pretest and a posttest, I will measure the effects of preaching with Pietist emphases on the spiritual maturity of my congregation. Finally, the fifth chapter presents outcomes and key takeaways from the study.

## CHAPTER 2

### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

#### **A Theology of Spiritual Growth**

Spiritual maturity lies at the heart of this thesis-project. We saw in Chapter 1 how the Church in America has failed to produce spiritually mature disciples who believe, act, and hope rightly. Those who remain at church, however, are primed and ready for spiritual growth, and preachers are in a unique position to offer that. This chapter serves as the theological foundation for this thesis-project, especially the project design presented in Chapter 4. We will then see Pietism's unique approach to spiritual maturity, highlighting August Herman Francke's view of sanctification. Finally, I will describe an original homiletic that places Pietist theology within a preaching context. Here, we turn our attention to a theology of spiritual growth to understand the kind of maturity toward which we strive.

We must strive for spiritual maturity. Our lives of faith are not completed once God saves us. As Millard Erickson says, "The Christian life, as we have seen, is not a static matter in which one is saved and then merely reposes in that knowledge. It is a process of growth and progress."<sup>1</sup> Jesus illustrates this in the Parable of the Sower, found in Matthew 13. The Sower tosses seeds on four different types of soil, each producing a different result. Three of the soils do not produce fruit, but one does, and it bears a staggering harvest. Explaining this, Jesus describes the seed as "the word of the kingdom" (vs. 19) falling on different hearts. In the heart that is good soil, the one who "hears the word and understands it" (vs. 23) will bear fruit.<sup>2</sup> Spiritual growth is the process of moving from hearing the word and understanding it toward bearing fruit.

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1 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Baker Academic, 2013), 912.

2 All Scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

Paul writes about the kind of fruit our lives produce in Galatians 5, contrasting the life of the Spirit with the life of the Flesh. When we live our lives apart from the Spirit of God, we produce only evil and disorder. A life lived in the Holy Spirit, however, produces Spirit-fruit, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). The presence or absence of that kind of fruit, as well as whether it is increasing or decreasing, are key indicators of God’s activity in our lives. God does this work and will bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6), and he calls us to partner with him. We, too, must strive to increase in the Fruits of the Spirit, in lives of spiritual maturity. Gerald Bray calls this pursuit “one of the most fundamental aspects of the Christian life.”<sup>3</sup>

Sanctification, the theological category encompassing spiritual growth, has a two-step process. First, at the moment of our salvation, when we are justified before God, God implants in us new life; this is called regeneration, or rebirth. The second step is the continual, life-long growth of that new life amid our old life. In that process, we are transformed from old to new, which is the ultimate goal of the Christian life.<sup>4</sup>

My discussion of spiritual growth will move through three main questions: Why do Christians grow? How do Christians grow? And what is the goal of Christian growth? The first question deals with the theological concept of regeneration, also called “renewal” or “new life,” while the second and third questions fall in the realm of sanctification. With this grasp on the necessity and manner of Christian growth, I will describe a homiletic that supports that journey. Finally, I will describe the unique theological framework of the Pietist movement before we look to see if a Pietist Homiletic sparks spiritual growth in a congregation.

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3 Gerald Bray, *God is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Crossway, 2012), 649.

4 Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Brazos Press, 2008), 236.

## Why Do Christians Grow? Rebirth

The moment we are saved, we are born again and experience rebirth. Titus 3:5 shows us these two moments are interconnected, saying “He saved us... through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit completes this action of renewal and rebirth instantly. This part of our sanctification is not a process, but a single moment of God’s work that God does not leave incomplete.<sup>5</sup> Colossians 1:13-14 says, “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” Jesus says in John 5:24 that anyone who believes “has passed from death to life.” The verb translated “has passed” is μεταβέβηκεν *metabebēken*, a perfect active indicative verb, indicating an action completed in the past. God moving the believer from death to life, regeneration, is over and done.

The life of Jesus Christ is born in us in our rebirth. “In regeneration the formation of the Christ life in us has begun,” writes Melvin Dieter, “the call to holiness and divine love becomes the compelling motive of the new life under the power and inspiration of the Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> In our rebirth, God imparts the life of Christ to us, and we find spiritual energy to go about living out that life.<sup>7</sup> It is energy that we need because despite our rebirth, our old lives are still at work within us.

Sin still entangles us. The author of Hebrews, in 12:1, encourages readers to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely.” Sin clings closely to us, tripping us up as we

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<sup>5</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 874.

<sup>6</sup> Melvin E. Dieter, “The Wesleyan Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 795.

seek to do God's will, to live as he intended. Within us struggles two natures, our sinfulness and our holiness. Paul talks about this using the terms "flesh" and "Spirit," respectively, in a particularly comforting section of Romans 7. He describes his struggle to do what he knows is right and his ultimate inability to do so. "I do not understand my own actions," he writes in Romans 7:15. "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." That which drives him to do what he does not want to do is sin, the life of the flesh that remains active in him alongside the activity of the Holy Spirit. Paul continues in verses 22 and 23, "For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members."

Winning the war between our natures is the work of discipleship. Erickson writes that regeneration "involves something new, a whole reversal of the person's natural tendencies.... For one side of regeneration involves putting to death or crucifying existent qualities."<sup>8</sup> In 1 Timothy 4:7, Paul instructs Timothy to "have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales. Train yourself in godliness." In our sanctification, there are qualities, characteristics, and activities that we must leave behind. Rebirth gives us the energy, the new life, necessary to do that growth.

### **How do Christians Grow? Sanctification**

The process of Christian growth is called sanctification. The word comes from the Greek ἁγιασμός *hagiasmos*, meaning to dedicate a person, place, or thing to be loyal to or serve a deity.<sup>9</sup> Something sanctified is set aside for a particular holy, religious purpose. When applied to

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<sup>8</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 873.

<sup>9</sup> *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (Louw & Nida) (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1989).

a person, as it is in each of its five New Testament appearances, sanctification refers to the process of living a life that reflects our devotion to God.<sup>10</sup>

The order of these events remains hotly debated, and it will be helpful to clarify my position and language. Some scholars and schools of thought draw either too much distinction between sanctification and regeneration or not enough. Wesleyan theology falls into the former category. Wesley describes two distinct “works of grace.” The “first work of grace” is salvation by grace through faith; it is our redemption, justification, and regeneration.<sup>11</sup> Then, after a period of perhaps years the Christian may encounter the “second work of grace,” sanctification. As Kenneth Girder describes, the second work is “occasioned by the baptism with the Holy Spirit, and constitutes a cleansing away of Adamic depravity and an empowerment for witnessing and for the holy life.”<sup>12</sup> The second work deals with our original sin while the first work deals with our guilt for individual sins committed. Interestingly, while the second is dependent on the first, it is not a necessary or inevitable outcome. To me, this renders our regeneration impotent or at least severely undercuts its power. The new life God implants in us in our rebirth ought to be immediately felt, able to enable holy lives right away.

Don Payne represents the latter view, extending sanctification to the point of ignoring or subsuming regeneration. In his book *Already Sanctified*, Payne highlights what he calls “accomplished sanctification.” It is different than the adjustment of our formal standing before God in justification, and also distinct from a godly maturity acquired through transformation. Accomplished sanctification is “a definitive and empowering reality that the Holy Spirit has

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10 *Greek-English Lexicon*.

11 J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1994), 350.

12 Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 350.

already created in the lives of believers.”<sup>13</sup> Payne limits this to a moment of sanctification, describing something very close to regeneration: “a dynamic act in which God creates everything related to holiness and makes possible everything related to transformation.”<sup>14</sup> For Payne, sanctification runs rough-shod over regeneration and then its effectiveness seems to end before life is transformed in any way. By keeping transformation out of sanctification, we diminish a vivacious and energetic theology.

My perspective is that sanctification and regeneration are two inter-connected yet distinct realities. William Placher, a Mainline theologian, offers us a middle ground by way of Karl Barth. Placher notes how, for Barth, everything is connected, especially those things that fall under the umbrella of salvation. We cannot separate our justification from our sanctification, nor our sanctification from our vocation.<sup>15</sup> The initial moment of salvation and regeneration flows into our sanctification, which continues to flow into those godly works of our vocation; they are connected and must be so, for we cannot hope to do good works without first being sanctified, and we cannot be sanctified unless we are first reborn.

However, the two remain distinct. Unlike regeneration, sanctification is not accomplished in a single moment. All the new life we will ever need has been implanted in us but our conformity with that new life must increase. “Although regeneration is instantaneously complete,” Erickson writes, “it is not an end in itself. As a change of spiritual impulses, regeneration is the beginning of a process of growth that continues throughout one’s lifetime.

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13 Don J. Payne, *Already Sanctified: A Theology of the Christian Life in Light of God’s Completed Work* (Baker Academic, 2020), 12.

14 Payne, *Already Sanctified*, 13.

15 William Carl Placher, *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* (Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2007), 109.



This process of spiritual maturation is sanctification.”<sup>16</sup> It’s what comes after we are saved by grace and is evidence of our heavenly citizenship as ones transferred into God’s kingdom (Phil. 3:20; Col. 1:13). Placher writes, “What happens to human beings when we are the objects of revelation is that our lives change.”<sup>17</sup>

Spiritual growth requires effort on our part. As Evan Howard writes, “Initial salvation requires a certain degree of commitment. One must be willing to make a go of it, so to speak.”<sup>18</sup> We must take hold of the new life that God has given to us. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18 that we “are being saved.” After the instant of initial salvation and regeneration, we move into the process of “being saved” as more of ourselves and our lives are sanctified.<sup>19</sup> Erickson says that sanctification “designates not merely the fact that believers are formally set apart, or belong to Christ, but that they are then to conduct themselves accordingly. They are to live lives of purity and goodness.”<sup>20</sup> Peter writes in 2 Peter 1:5-7 instructing his people to “make every effort to support your faith with goodness” and several other virtues: self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love. We must “lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him,” lives that “bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10).

To be clear, our actions do not in any way bring about our regeneration nor do we begin our sanctification. It is undoubtedly the work of the Holy Spirit, an intentional, volitional work that we cannot produce on our own.<sup>21</sup> In this, the Holy Spirit is “the primary agent of Christian

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16 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 874.

17 Placher, *The Triune God*, 96.

18 Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 261.

19 Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 245-46.

20 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 898.

21 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 899.

spiritual formation.”<sup>22</sup> Placher gets at this tension. “We must be ethically transformed in order to know God better,” he writes, “but the ethical transformation too is God's gift.”<sup>23</sup> We must ground any discussion of right actions in God’s grace or else we will slide into moralizing works-righteousness. Our efforts to live sanctified lives will quickly become burdensome without accepting that God provides the means to do those right actions.<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther offers a reminder to be grateful: “For if any man feel in himself a love towards the Word of God, and willingly hears, talks, writes, and thinks of Christ, let that man know that this is not the work of man’s reason, but the gift of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>25</sup>

Our sanctification has specific direction. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 tells us that the will of God in our sanctification is that we would keep ourselves from a host of sinful, negative behaviors. After all, “God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.”<sup>26</sup> As we are sanctified, God makes us holy and godly, and we move away from sin and toward perfection.

### **Away from Sin**

In sanctification, we move toward godliness and away from sinfulness. We are “set apart from sin toward becoming holy.”<sup>27</sup> Our sacred service to God produces in us a better life, as we are freed from the effects of our sin and sinfulness. Hoekema uses the word “pollution” to describe the continual, cyclical negative effects of sin. Sanctification, he writes, “is concerned

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22 Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 273.

23 Placher, *The Triune God*, 96.

24 Payne, *Already Sanctified*, 106.

25 Martin Luther, quoted in Placher, *The Triune God*, 96.

26 1 Thessalonians 4:7 NIV. The NIV translates ἁγιασμὸς *hagiasmō* as “to live a holy life.”

27 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 896.

with the *pollution* of sin... [by which] we mean the corruption of our nature, a corruption that is the result of sin and that, in turn, produces further sin.”<sup>28</sup>

In this, sanctification requires our active choice. It is entirely accomplished by the work of God yet needs our participation as well. Here I agree with the Wesleyan viewpoint. As John Wesley understood sanctification, individuals are entirely sinful and are completely reliant upon God’s grace.<sup>29</sup> However, humans are free to choose and must choose to accept and join in God’s work in his or her life. As Melvin Dieter puts it, “Only the merits of Christ’s life and death bring us salvation, and His grace alone gives us the freedom to respond to His offer of forgiveness, cleansing, and a new relationship with Him in love. The grace of response is available to all persons; whosoever will come.”<sup>30</sup>

Our choices come from our inclinations, which God adjusts as we are sanctified. Erickson states that sanctification results in “a change in the individual’s inclinations and impulses.”<sup>31</sup> It is incumbent upon Christians who have experienced new life to make choices in line with that new life. Wesley describes this as a “bent to sinning” that must be transformed to become a “bent to loving obedience.”<sup>32</sup> As our desires are brought in line with God’s desires, our choices will follow.

If Christians do not grow, we remain diminished, less than we could be, with areas of our lives continually inclined toward sin. Ephesians 4:13 says we are to use whatever gifts God has given us to build up the Body of Christ “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the

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28 Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 61; emphasis original.

29 Dieter, “The Wesleyan Perspective,” 15.

30 Dieter, “The Wesleyan Perspective,” 16.

31 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 875.

32 Dieter, “The Wesleyan Perspective,” 21.

knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

Measuring up to the “full stature of Christ” implies that we can fall short of that stature. We can be partial disciples, partial followers of Christ, partially grown. Through salvation, Christians are brought into a loving relationship with God through Jesus. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which results in regeneration, we are given the power to grow to express that relationship through loving God and loving neighbor. Wesley grounded this view of sanctification in Galatians 5:6, “faith working by love,”<sup>33</sup> a work that includes a “personal restoration to the moral image of God” and a heart that is perfected by that love.<sup>34</sup>

### **Toward Perfection**

The goal of our sanctification is perfection. Jesus makes this goal clear in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” How possible this is for us remains hotly debated. Some, such as the Wesleyan tradition, hold that we can be perfectly sinless in this life. Others find that sinlessness will escape us until we arrive in heaven, a position held by Reformed theologians. While Wesley gives us helpful thoughts on perfection, ultimately, I land with the Reformed tradition. Sinless perfection is the goal and standard for our lives, but we will not achieve it in this life. This does not absolve us of the need to pursue perfection, however, something Wesley helps us to see.

John Wesley embraced the idea of perfection. Quoting Wesley, Dieter writes that he “allowed no stopping point in the Christian's quest for holiness – ‘no holiness of *degree*, no point of conclusion.’”<sup>35</sup> Christians strive for perfect holiness and, in Wesley’s view, can attain that perfection. In sanctification, our original sin is, as Wesley liked to say, “expelled,” “destroyed” or

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33 Dieter, “The Wesleyan Perspective,” 20.

34 Dieter, “The Wesleyan Perspective,” 20-21.

35 Dieter, “The Wesleyan Perspective,” 19; emphasis original.

“done away with.”<sup>36</sup> Once expelled, that depraved state no longer holds sway and we are enabled to, as Grider says, “maintain the state of justification.”<sup>37</sup> This is, for the Wesleyan, the perfection that Jesus was speaking about.

I disagree with Wesley’s view of perfection. It seems to say that we will reach a time in our earthly lives where we can say “I am perfect” rather than “I am being perfected.” I do not think we can ever truly be rid of that depraved state, or at least the effects of it. Not even the Apostle Paul considered himself “complete” in this way, but rather continually pressed on toward that goal.<sup>38</sup> Erickson and the Reformed perspective clarify what the goal of perfection means for us who cannot live sinlessly.

In Matthew 5:48, Jesus’s word “perfection” means “completion.” Erickson shows that the Greek word “perfect,” τέλειοι *teleioi* doesn’t mean “spotless” or even “flawless,” but rather “complete.” He concludes, “It is quite possible, then, to be ‘perfect’ without being entirely free from sin. That is, we can possess the fullness of Jesus Christ (Eph 4:13) and the full fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23) without possessing them completely.”<sup>39</sup> While we continue to strive to be sinless, this offers us room to allow our sanctification to take place at God’s pace without the self-imposed burden of perfect moral sinlessness. Instead, God moves us through a process of transformation as we come to possess the fullness of Jesus and the Spirit’s fruit.

This process of transformation toward perfection is called spiritual growth, and it is holistic. “Christian transformation touches us from the beginning to the end of our lives,” says

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36 Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 380.

37 Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, 350.

38 Phil 3:13ff.

39 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 901.

Howard. “And Christian transformation touches every aspect of our being.”<sup>40</sup> This transformation affects the trajectory of our lives, as we continually discover different areas of our lives to be sanctified. I appreciate the Reformed perspective here, summarized by Anthony Hoekema:

Sanctification, further, effects a renewal of our nature that is, it brings about a change of direction rather than a change in substance. In sanctifying us, God does not equip us with powers or capacities that are totally different from those we had before; rather, He enables us to use the gifts He gave us in the right way instead of in sinful ways. Sanctification empowers us to think, will, and love in a way that glorifies God, namely, to think God's thoughts after Him and to do what is in harmony with His will.<sup>41</sup>

Spiritual growth, then, is more like endurance training than getting taller. Children get taller simply because they are alive, but that does not enable them to run long distances (though youthfulness certainly helps). Endurance training is a helpful metaphor, one that Biblical authors turned to often to communicate this idea. Paul uses it to great effect in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27,

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air, but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

Spiritual growth requires that we work in concert with the Holy Spirit to move away from sin and toward perfection. Just as important is a firm grasp on the pattern for our growth. Runners train with a goal in mind, as do boxers or any other athlete; training is not randomly punishing a body. To truly grow, we must know the goal, where we are growing.

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40 Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 254.

41 Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective,” 62.

## What is the Goal of Christian Growth? Christlikeness

Christians grow toward Christ. Our growth shapes us into the image of Jesus, the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus himself is our archetype. Paul writes in Romans 8:29 that we are to be “conformed to the image of [God’s] Son,” and again in 2 Corinthians 3:18, we “are being transformed into the same image (the image of Christ) from one degree of glory to another.” Christians are adopted into God’s family (Romans 8:15) and so “we belong to God and consequently should show a likeness to him.”<sup>42</sup>

Jesus is the source of our growth. He used the image of a vine and branches to highlight the vital connection his disciples must have with him (John 15:1-17). We abide in him, and his energy is what produces growth and fruit. Bray uses the language of union to describe this kind of abiding. He writes, “It is union with Christ that leads to our sanctification, not anything we do or have done that might earn us the accolade of ‘saint.’”<sup>43</sup> Erickson agrees, suggesting that Jesus himself viewed union with him as the key to the whole Christian life.<sup>44</sup> Paul uses the image of a body with Christ as its head. “We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,” he writes in Ephesians 4:14, “from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.” Our growth comes from Jesus and is toward Jesus.

This includes taking on both Christ’s thought patterns and behaviors. Bray writes, “Growth in spiritual maturity is the logical consequence of our adoption into the family of God and is what we call ‘sanctification.’ This means that we must acquire something of the characteristics that distinguish God from his creation and make him the loving spiritual Father

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42 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 898.

43 Bray, *God is Love*, 648.

44 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 905.

that he is.”<sup>45</sup> The great Christ Hymn following Philippians 2:5 entreats us to “let the same mind be in you and was in Christ Jesus.” Paul, again, instructs his churches to “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1) Howard highlights the impact, “We are to share the heart of Christ and the mind of Christ. We are to participate in the suffering of Christ and in the reign of Christ. Mature harmony with Christ – *this* is our goal.”<sup>46</sup> To grow as a Christian is to grow to be more like Jesus, both in thought and deed. He is our source and our pattern.

So, we see spiritual growth is essential to true Christian discipleship. Howard offers this summary statement of sanctification, “Christian spiritual formation, responding to the gracious work of God and requiring both perseverance and progress, is the intentional and Godward reorientation and rehabilitation of human experience. It aims at mature harmony with Christ and is expressed in the concrete realities of everyday life.”<sup>47</sup> We cannot simply remain as we are on the day we start the Christian journey. We have died with Christ and have been raised with him. Our old clothes are worn to tatters, yet we find it difficult to take them off. The church in the United States, as I argued in Chapter 1, has not challenged enough those who are content to wear their rags. We seem to have failed to do the hard work of producing disciples who wear the glorious new clothes of Jesus Christ. Yet preaching sits in a unique position to address to this lack. The next section of this chapter offers a theology of preaching and describes how preaching can be directed toward spiritual growth.

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45 Bray, *God is Love*, 647. Interestingly, Bray and Erickson, both appearing to write from a conservative Evangelical position, tend to focus on God as the character we ought to emulate rather than Jesus. I am more drawn to Jesus himself. Our God is certainly One and shares attributes, however I am inclined to think our God is also Triune enough that God the Son is our ultimate pattern. We are made in the Image of God but grow in the Image of Christ.

46 Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 274; emphasis original.

47 Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 269.



## **Theology of Preaching**

Preaching is a uniquely Christian act of communication. Because Christian faith is grounded in divine speech, preaching holds a special place. God is a God who spoke the universe into being and who continues to speak today. In light of a God who speaks, speaking about the things of God takes on special weight and meaning in the task of producing spiritually mature disciples. Preaching is an essential element in spiritual growth, which means that the blame for the American church's struggle to produce spiritual maturity lies in part on preachers. We have preached unsuccessfully by not encouraging our people to know Scripture and to believe, act, and hope rightly. We can do better. This section will lay a theological foundation for preaching, particularly as it relates to spiritual growth. We will see what preaching is and why we do it, look at preaching toward spiritual growth, and see that the preacher's own spiritual maturity is essential for this ministry.

### **What is Preaching: Toward a Definition**

Preaching is different than teaching or lecturing or simply speaking in front of people. It is a "labor," a skill that elders in the early church worked to hone, and something worthy of "double honor" according to Paul (1 Timothy 5:17). I offer this definition: Preaching is a public communication event that involves the inner spiritual life of the speaker, proclaims, heralds, and teaches the good news about the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, and aims at transforming the lives of listeners through preaching exclusively a message drawn from Scripture.

To arrive at this definition, we will first look at what it is *not*. This will cleanse our pallet, so to speak, preparing us to hear from the New Testament where we will see different aspects that comprise a Biblical definition of preaching.

## What Preaching is Not

Though preaching is mechanically similar to other kinds of public speech, it is more than merely an “exhortation or admonition or ‘inspirational’ address.”<sup>48</sup> A person may stand in front of an audience and spark in them emotional reactions and expressions of devotion, but this does not rise to the level of preaching. Preaching is more than a speaker seeking to illuminate truth or even ignite religious fervor. Preaching is more than speaking.

Indeed, it is even more than speaking about the Bible. Patterson points to 2 Corinthians 2:17 and notes that “Paul spoke disapprovingly of those who ‘peddle the word of God.’”<sup>49</sup> “Peddling” is a word associated with the marketplace, and it specifically refers to those who sell cheap, watered-down wine. Anyone can get up and hock spiritualisms taken from our Scripture, but that doesn’t mean they’re preaching. Edmund Clowney pushes this further, drawing a distinction between preaching and leading a small group Bible study, even a legitimate, heart-felt, truly Christian one.<sup>50</sup>

Preaching is different. It’s not better than other ways of communicating God’s Word, such as teaching or a small group Bible study, but it is different. It is, as Tim Keller says, “a unique way that God speaks to and builds up people, and it sets up the more organic forms of Word ministry.”<sup>51</sup> More than a speech or a lecture, yet adjacent to conversations about or teaching Scripture or doctrine, the sermon stands separate. To understand the nuances of Christian preaching, we must ground our definition in the Scriptures.

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48 Donald C. Frisk, “Biblical Moorings,” in *Glad Hearts*, ed. James R. Hawkinson (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 465.

49 Ben Patterson, “Why the Sermon?,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 220.

50 Clowney, quoted in Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (Penguin, 2015), loc. 154. Kindle.

51 Keller, *Preaching*, loc. 163. Kindle.

## Preaching in Scripture

In the New Testament, authors used a few different words to describe what we would consider “preaching” today. I suggest that preaching is a public communication event that involves the inner spiritual life of the speaker, and proclaims, heralds, and teaches the good news about the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. Jay Adams boils “preaching” down to two basic tasks: “evangelistic preaching (heralding, announcing the good news) and pastoral or edificational preaching (teaching)” and then brings the two under the single word “preaching.” I will do the same, using that single word to describe the breadth of New Testament ideas carried out in our churches today.<sup>52</sup> These words point the way toward my definition and theology of preaching.

First, εὐαγγελίζω *euangelizō*, which is the verb form of the familiar εὐαγγέλιον *euangelion* or “good news.” *Euangelizō* means “to communicate good news concerning something (in the NT a particular reference to the gospel message about Jesus).”<sup>53</sup> Jesus summarized his own preaching message in Luke 4:43 by saying, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.” Jesus’ ministry, at a fundamental level, involved informing people of a new reality, that God’s Kingdom was here. Paul writes in Romans 15:20 that his goal is to “proclaim the good news” where people have not yet heard it. To proclaim is to tell good news to those who might not know.

A group of connected words are also used in the New Testament to depict preaching: κηρύσσω *kērusso*, meaning, “to announce extensively and publicly — ‘to proclaim, to tell.’”<sup>54</sup>

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52 Jay E. Adams, *Preaching With Purpose: The Urgent Task of Homiletics* (Zondervan, 2015), loc. 227. Kindle.

53 *Greek-English Lexicon*.

54 *Greek-English Lexicon*.

Two nouns relate to this verb: κήρυγμα *kērygma*, meaning “the content of what is preached,” and κήρυξ *kēruξ*, which means a herald or “a person who preaches — ‘preacher.’”<sup>55</sup> If *euangelizō* is proclamation, we might consider *kērusso* to be “heralding.” A herald goes from town to town, methodically, publicly, thoroughly making his news known. Paul describes himself as a “herald” in his letters to Timothy, tying his *kēruξ* to his work of teaching the faith to new believers.<sup>56</sup> Jay Adams considers this “an evangelistic enterprise,” and the use of *kērusso* throughout the Gospels certainly bears this out.<sup>57</sup> For example, Jesus sends his disciples to “the lost sheep of Israel,” instructing them to “proclaim (κηρύσσετε *kērussete*) the good news” (Matthew 10:5ff). People who do not know need to be told. In this way, *kērusso* is like *euangelizō*, though *kērusso* has overtones of itinerancy, seeking out those who do not know.

To the duo of *euangelizō* and *kērusso*, we also add διδάσκω *didaskō* or “to provide instruction in a formal or informal setting — ‘to teach, teaching.’”<sup>58</sup> Much of Jesus ministry is described as “teaching,” from parables (Mark 4:2) to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:2). Jesus instructs his disciples in the Great Commission to go out to the ends of the earth “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). Paul tells the church in Colossae to “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom” (Colossians 3:16). There is much to learn, and preaching takes up the task of teaching.

In addition to the New Testament authors, we can turn to the Old Testament for help defining preaching. The OT prophets are predecessors to Christian preaching. These preachers model some important aspects of our homiletical ministry.

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55 *Greek-English Lexicon.*

56 1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11.

57 Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, 6.

58 *Greek-English Lexicon.*

Prophets in the Old Testament had a dual call: both their inner lives with God and their outer interactions with God's people were a part of their ministry. Alex Gordon notes that prophets in the Old Testament are most often referred to by two names: "man of God" and "seer."<sup>59</sup> Being a man of God indicates that the prophet enjoyed a close relationship with God. Seers would receive a vision from God, the very thing that made them prophets. These titles together form the inward side of the prophet's life, and are paired with the technical term "prophet," which is their outward vocation, telling what they have heard. According to Gordon, the word "prophet" is derived from an older root for "bubbling up."<sup>60</sup> "The prophet, consequently," writes Gordon, "is one whose words pour forth with eager, impetuous, irresistible force."<sup>61</sup> For the prophets, their inner lives with God bubbled out of them to become powerful words of correction and encouragement for Israel.

This is a helpful model for modern preachers, whose inner lives are just as important. Gordon makes this point clear, saying, "Behind all our public utterances there must be the vision of God and truth; else our words will become formal and unreal, mere phrases that cannot reach the heart. And if there be this vision, our words will come forth with a certain irresistible impulse."<sup>62</sup> The prophet Micah expresses just how essential a vibrant inner life with God is in Micah 3:8, "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin."

The prophets, working in concert with and dependent upon God, spoke to create change in their audience. "As God's messengers," writes Smith, "they were not interested in just

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59 Alex R. Gordon, "The Prophets as Models for the Preacher." *The Biblical World* 40, no. 5 (1912): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3141765>: 338.

60 Alex R. Gordon, "The Prophets as Models for the Preacher": 339.

61 Alex R. Gordon, "The Prophets as Models for the Preacher": 339.

62 Alex R. Gordon, "The Prophets as Models for the Preacher": 339.

declaring the truth. Their purpose went far beyond the goal of simply repeating what they heard.”<sup>63</sup> Transformation was their goal, moving listeners from unfaithful to faithful actions, in both individuals and communities.

Scripture is replete with compelling pictures of preaching. From the Old Testament, we see a preacher as someone deeply connected to God in his or her own faith, and someone firmly committed to transforming listeners by public speech, depending on and partnering with the Spirit of God. In the New Testament, we see public proclamation and methodical heralding of the good news of Jesus Christ. Preaching today is all those things wrapped up in a single sermonic moment.

### **Preaching the Biblical Message**

For preaching to rise above merely speaking about the Bible, it must convey the message of the Bible. As Haddon Robinson plainly states, “When preachers speak as heralds, they must cry out ‘the Word.’ Anything less cannot legitimately pass for Christian preaching.”<sup>64</sup> Adams boils the entire task of preaching down to “the explanation and application of Scripture.”<sup>65</sup> We restrict the content of our sermons to the message of Scripture because God’s words have power.

God is able to transform lives; we are not. Though God works through the preacher’s skill, it certainly is not our own rhetorical or homiletical brilliance that sparks transformation. Fleming Rutledge draws the contrast, saying, “It is not the pastor’s imperfect love that is being set forth, but God’s inexhaustible *agape*; not the preacher’s opinions about an issue, but God’s

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63 Gary V. Smith, *The Prophets as Preachers: An Introduction to the Hebrew Prophets* (B&H Publishing Group, 1998), 15.

64 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 3.

65 Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, loc. 306. Kindle.

call from his Word; not the speaker's agenda, but the story of God's providence."<sup>66</sup> Our words are not what really matter. As homiletician Jeffrey Arthurs points out, "God's words do things."<sup>67</sup> God created the universe by speaking, and God continues to speak today. A true sermon gives voice to God's own words, carrying the divine vocalizations from the pages of the Bible to the ears of the congregation. Therefore, God's words "can even transform sin-twisted lives like ours."<sup>68</sup>

As it is the God-inspired text, to truly preach it requires the preacher to actively rely on the Holy Spirit. The work of the Spirit, as was true for the prophets of the Old Testament, is essential for effective interpretation of Scripture and communication of the meaning we find there. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, he did not go to those Christians with "lofty words of wisdom," but "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling," and, crucially, "with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power." While we are not told what precisely that demonstration was, the Spirit showed up and sparked faith and growth and discipleship in Paul's listeners.

Preachers must rely on the Spirit of God actively, fully aware of his or her own shortcomings and inability to effect the transformation we want to see. As Tim Keller says, "While the difference between a bad sermon and a good sermon is mainly the responsibility of the preacher, the difference between good preaching and great preaching lies mainly in the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the listener as well as the preacher."<sup>69</sup> We see this at work in

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66 Fleming Rutledge, *And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching From the Old Testament* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 21.

67 Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding: Stirring Memory in an Age of Forgetfulness* (InterVarsity Press, 2017), loc. 863. Kindle.

68 J. Kent Edwards, *Deep Preaching: Creating Sermons That Go Beyond the Superficial* (B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 32.

69 Keller, *Preaching*, loc. 194. Kindle.

Acts 16:14. Lydia goes to hear Paul preach, but the text emphasizes that God opened her heart. Dallas Willard points to our ineffectiveness without the Holy Spirit by reminding preachers that we are always inadequate.<sup>70</sup> We are not up to the task of transforming our listeners, but that's not really the issue. We can lay aside the burden of needing to make change happen and trust that God will work. By actively relying on the Holy Spirit to do the work only God can do, we free ourselves to let God's strength shine through our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

So, we return to a definition of preaching. It is a public speech that proclaims, heralds, and teaches the good news of Jesus Christ; it is born from the preacher's deep, personal relationship with God; it aims at transforming the lives of listeners through preaching exclusively a message drawn from Scripture; it is fully reliant on the power of the Holy Spirit. While I would simply call this "preaching," many refer to it as "expository preaching." Haddon Robinson has the classic and definitive definition:

Expository Preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.<sup>71</sup>

God brings about transformation through preaching as Biblical truth is applied to those listening. Transformation is the realm of sanctification and spiritual growth. We turn now to see how preaching might be targeted to bring about that growth.

### **Preaching to Spiritual Maturity**

Preaching is a powerful avenue of God's work in followers of Christ to bring them to spiritual maturity. Sanctification is a growth process, one that takes time, and requires consistent

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<sup>70</sup> Dallas Willard, "A Cup Running Over," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 72.

<sup>71</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 5.



effort on our part. God uses preachers and sermons to edify, build up, and correct Christians as they grow. Our preaching can and must be oriented toward building up in spiritual maturity. Paul writes in Colossians 1:28-29 that this is the goal of preaching: “It is he [Jesus] whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and strive with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.”

Preaching calls for and pushes listeners to change and grow. Adams notes how essential this is to preaching, saying, “Preaching that stops short of asking for change that is appropriate to the Holy Spirit’s letters to His church is not preaching at all; at best, it is lecturing.”<sup>72</sup> Preaching’s purpose is not to impart information, but to evoke faith and obedience.<sup>73</sup> We will look at how to preach to promote change and evoke mature faith in more depth in Chapter 3. Here we will see the necessary foundation of a spiritually mature preacher.

The preacher must have an intimate, personal relationship with Jesus. Chapell cited Phillip Brook’s definition of preaching as “truth poured through personality.”<sup>74</sup> A personality that is lacking in spiritual maturity, or one that does not have evidence of spiritual growth, disfigures or hinders the truth that God pours through. As Jesus says, “The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). Robinson, so good at packing meaning into a few words, drives this point home: “The audience does not hear a

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<sup>72</sup> Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, loc. 825. Kindle.

<sup>73</sup> Everett Wilson, “Proclaiming the Story,” in *Glad Hearts*, (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 467.

<sup>74</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Baker Academic, 2018), loc. 511. Kindle.

sermon; it hears a person – it hears you.”<sup>75</sup> Bishop William Alfred Quayle (1860-1925) makes a similarly fine turn-of-phrase:

Preaching is the art of making a sermon and delivering it?... Why, no, that is not preaching. Preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that!<sup>76</sup>

We preach from what is within us. Jesus instructs his disciples in Matthew 10:27 to “proclaim [*kērusso*] from the housetops” what he told them in private. We’ll have nothing to say unless we first hear those words from Jesus in the privacy of our hearts. The Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 was an amazingly successful preacher in this regard. After her own transformational encounter with Jesus, her testimony brought many of her neighbors to him, resulting in changed lives and true belief (see John 4:41-42). The same is true for us who follow in her footsteps.

Preaching is incarnational. With a particularly memorable expression, Arthurs says, “God has placed his Word in bodies so that we turn ink into blood.”<sup>77</sup> As the Holy Spirit works within us to manifest maturity, we enact that in the world. Schultze, citing 2 Corinthians 3:1-3, says this is an essential piece of our communication. He writes, “As Paul puts it, we servant communicators are part of our message. Our inner character speaks intentionally and unintentionally. We become what Paul calls God’s ‘letters,’ with our ‘text’ written in our hearts and communicated through our character.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, we must be careful to ensure that our

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75 Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 8.

76 William A. Quayle, quoted in Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 8.

77 Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding*, loc. 1787. Kindle.

78 Quentin J. Schultze, *Communicating with Grace and Virtue: Learning to Listen, Speak, Text, and Interact as a Christian* (Baker Academic, 2020), loc. 1577. Kindle.

proclamation is in line with the Spirit's work. Eugene Peterson calls preachers (and Christians in general), to live out in their lives what they believe in their hearts.<sup>79</sup>

The Christian life is the lifelong practice of attending to the details of congruence – congruence between ends and means, congruence between what we do and the way we do it, congruence between what is written in Scripture and our living out what is written, congruence between a ship and its prow, congruence between preaching and living, congruence between the sermon and what is lived in both preacher and congregation, the congruence of the Word made flesh in Jesus with what is lived in our flesh.<sup>80</sup>

This personally lived faith, while essential for true preaching, also increases the effectiveness of the sermon. When Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 that their message came with words and with the power of the Holy Spirit, and he adds another aspect that commends the truth of what they said: “just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.” For us to most effectively encourage, persuade, or correct a listener, we must ourselves be living how we want them to live.

Finally, without the reservoir of our own relationship with Jesus, no preacher will last long in the ministry. The Holy Spirit alone sustains us through the rigors of study and delivery, always prepared to preach “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2). Gustaf F. Johnson (1873-1959), a minister and evangelist of my own theological tradition, the Evangelical Covenant Church, wrote compellingly about this:

Many a beautiful sermon containing wonderful truth and dressed in eloquent language falls to the ground like a bird shot down in flight. What is lacking? No heart! ... Why is this? Simply because the preacher has neglected to make what he says a vital issue for himself. He is like a record player which grinds out what has been cut into the record of

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<sup>79</sup> To my knowledge Peterson never claimed to be a Pietist, though statements like this would bring him into their fold, as we'll see below.

<sup>80</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God Formed By the Words of God* New York: WaterBrook, 2017, xviii.

the memory during the previous week. This is not preaching. This is merely making a speech...

Oh, my weary, discouraged, hopeless and sinking brother! You wish that you had never become a preacher. Right you are! A preacher without fire is more unhappy than a street sweeper with a worn-out broom. But you may re-establish company with the Lord Jesus—and you may do this today. Perhaps he is standing just over there, and like the disciples of old, you do not recognize him. Now he will come and fellowship with you on your journey. And then the fire will be rekindled in your heart.<sup>81</sup>

As a preacher in the Evangelical Covenant Church, to which I belong, Johnson stands on the shoulders of Historic Pietism. Our denomination was born out of the Pietist movement, and the way he speaks of an essential relationship with Jesus is emblematic of their theology. We have set the theological foundation of spiritual growth through rebirth and sanctification, and we now have a grasp on preaching and its potential role in sparking that growth. This thesis-project will test the potential for applying Pietism's unique theological emphases in a modern preaching context. We turn now to understanding Pietism's theological foundation.

### **Pietism's Main Theological Themes**

At its core, Historic Pietists like Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) and August Herman Francke sought to restore the understanding of the true Christian. Nominal Christians were quite literally everywhere in 17th Century Germany, as every child born was considered a Lutheran. The Pietists contended that simply being on a church register and being in a church pew were not enough. More is required to be a follower of Christ, an active disciple, a true Christian. Pietists pushed for a *living faith* and against what they called “dead orthodoxy.” You can mentally assent to all the right doctrines, but if it does not work itself out in your life, those thoughts mean nothing.

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<sup>81</sup> Gustaf F. Johnson, “Passion for Christ,” in *Glad Hearts*, ed. James R. Hawkinson (Chicago: Covenant Publications 2003), 466-67; 495.

Pietism was not a movement built on novel theologies. They were not interested in constructing another long set of doctrines or instituting another Protestant denomination. What is interesting, and what makes the study of Pietism worthwhile for us, is what ends up occupying their pastoral and theological attention instead. Roger Olson and Christian Collins Winn write, “Other Christian movements share many of these features or hallmarks, but Pietism puts them together distinctively and emphasizes them in a manner most others do not.”<sup>82</sup> Pietists were not inventors, but instead refurbished and restored those parts of Christian theology and practice they felt had become tarnished, calcified, or disrepair.

Therefore, what we see when we drill into fundamental Pietist theology is not a discrete list of doctrine and dogma. Pietist theology is a set of impulses, as Gehrz and Pattie described it. Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom says that Pietism is best understood as an ethos, something that is “caught, not taught.”<sup>83</sup> A Pietistic ethic of life is not “decision-based,” meaning it's not primarily concerned with “what should I do in this specific circumstance?” Rather, it is virtue-based, focusing on “who ought I to be?”<sup>84</sup> From that answer flows many specific applications, which occupied a great deal of the Pietists' time.

What the Christian does comes from who the Christian is. This is one of the hallmarks of Pietist theology, what C. John Weborg calls the “convergence of Pietism,” belief and action converging in a living faith.<sup>85</sup> Weborg writes, “The Pietists wanted to restore a balance; bring doctrine and life into congruity and pastor and people together around the Scripture as the source

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82 Roger E. Olson and Christian T. Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 107.

83 Jane Chao Pomeroy and Cathy Norman Peterson. “We Are Pietists With Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom.” (2021): <https://covchurch.org/2021/11/16/we-are-pietists-with-michelle-clifton-soderstrom/>.

84 Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys: The Christian Ethic of Pietism* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 15-16.

85 Weborg, quoted in Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 16.

of promise and power.”<sup>86</sup> Pietists worked to bring together many threads into a common weave, with God as the weaver and Scripture as the pattern. This was how the Pietists would renew the whole church, and the whole world.<sup>87</sup> They wanted Christians, both clergy and lay people, to integrate “intellectual belief, heartfelt commitment, and the practical living out of one's faith in love,” as Gehrz and Pattie write. “To put it simply, such a faith engages and enlivens one's head *and* heart *and* hands.”<sup>88</sup>

Practical piety, or *praxis pietatis* as the Pietists would have written, is the central heartbeat of Pietism.<sup>89</sup> Underneath all the other theological concepts that occupied Pietists’ attention was the constant drumbeat of righteous practicality. As we saw in Chapter 1, when Francke needed to distill the essence of the Christian life and the goal of our spiritual growth, he said this: “Quite simply remember you would 1. believe, 2. do, 3. hope what is taught, commanded, and promised in Scripture.”<sup>90</sup>

In addition to shaping an individual’s spiritual maturity, Pietist theology broadly follows those three contours: Believing, Doing, and Hoping. In seeking to answer the question of what constitutes a true Christian, Pietism says it is one who believes rightly, does rightly, and hopes rightly. As we explore their unique theological emphases and impulses, Believing, Doing, and

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86 C. John Weborg, “Pietism: ‘the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany’.” *The Covenant Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1985): 3-29.  
<https://gordonconwell.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000943767&site=ehost-live&scope=sitehttp://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/index>, 10.

87 Christopher Gehrz and Mark Pattie III, *The Pietist Option: Hope for the Renewal of Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 8.

88 Gehrz and Pattie III, *The Pietist Option*, 64; emphasis original.

89 Ergon W. Gerdes. “Theological Tenets of Pietism.” *Covenant Quarterly* Vol. XXXIV, no. 1 & 2 (1976): 37.

90 Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 90.

Hoping will be our framework for understanding Pietist thought and a guide as we move toward a Pietist Homiletic.

## Believing

Orthodox thought was foundational for the Pietists.<sup>91</sup> They worked tirelessly to identify and articulate doctrine grounded only in Scripture. Brown writes in *Understanding Pietism*, “Pietism exalted the supremacy of the Bible above all other external standards.”<sup>92</sup> Such an intense focus on scripture over and against human teaching put them outside the norm of 17th century Lutherans. Spener was adamant, however, writing “The Word of God remains the seed from which all that is good must grow.”<sup>93</sup> What the true Christian believes must come from Scripture, which led the Pietists to develop a full Pneumatology. Spener felt that the Spirit operated only through Scripture, and Scripture was only effective in transformation through the incessant work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>94</sup> Spirit and Scripture work hand in hand and must both be engaged for true understanding.

With right belief coming solely from Scripture and the discernment of the Spirit, Pietists developed a unique way of handling disagreements. They knew that Scripture can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and so they distinguished between what was essential Christian doctrine and what was not. Spener summarized this position with a Latin saying: *in necessariis veritas (unitas), in non necessariis libertas, in omnibus caritas*.<sup>95</sup> Olson renders this well in English as “In

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91 This was not necessarily true for Radical Pietists. See Douglas Shantz, *An Introduction to German Pietism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013) for a description of this and other branches of Pietism.

92 Dale W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Evangel Publishing House, 1996), 46.

93 Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), 91.

94 Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 50.

95 Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 33.

essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things charity (love).”<sup>96</sup> Spener tended to regard as essential those doctrines that dealt with personal religious experiences.<sup>97</sup> Right belief includes the freedom to disagree about secondary issues and remain unified. Primary issues, for Pietists, are often tied up in individual salvation.

It is perhaps not surprising then that right belief takes the shape of an individual’s stages of faith. Having moved from a corporate to an inwardly focused spirituality, the emphases in Pietist belief tended to fall on inward, individual experiences.<sup>98</sup> Spener wrote of a person moving through three stages when being saved, “the kindling of faith, justification and adoption as children of God, and the completion of the new man.”<sup>99</sup> We will move through these stages, Conversion, Regeneration, and Completion, to see Pietism’s emphasis on right belief.

### *Conversion*

Conversion lies at the heart of the whole Pietist movement, and they understood its complex nature. Pietists sought to renew the church by growing true Christians, and a true conversion was the beginning of that journey. It distinguished between real discipleship and mere nominal adherence.<sup>100</sup> A true conversion produces passionate followers of Christ. However, Pietists understood that conversion was more than simply the start of that journey, more than an initial mental commitment to Jesus. Pietists saw the Christian life as one of many conversions.

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96 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 104.

97 Theodore G. Tappert, “Introduction: The Times, the Man, the Book,” in *Pia Desideria* (Fortress Press, 1964): 26.

98 Ergon W. Gerdes, “Theological Tenets of Pietism”: 51.

99 Manfred Waldemar Kohl. “*Wiedergeburt* as the Central Theme in Pietism.” *The Covenant Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1974): <https://gordonconwell.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000725302&lang=en%2cen&site=ehost-live&scope=site>: 2.

100 Jonathan Strom, *German Pietism and the Problem of Conversion* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), loc. 112. Kindle.



We do not surrender our complete selves to Christ in one single moment, nor does complete faith in him spring up in us instantly. Ever and again, Jesus' followers are presented opportunities to abandon our unbelief to trust more completely.

Personally experiencing Jesus was an essential element of true conversion for the Pietist movement. Only those who had directly encountered Jesus and knew his salvation for themselves could be considered a Christian, even in the academy.<sup>101</sup> Emotional expression evidenced true conversion. Many early Pietists, Count Nikolas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) in particular, described conversion as bringing about "joyfulness" that continued throughout the converted one's life.<sup>102</sup> Francke's own conversion was of this sort, a deeply emotional encounter with Jesus that moved him from disbelief and despair to the joy of faith in a single, radical evening.<sup>103</sup>

The subjective experience was both central to the Pietists' understanding of conversion and an area of concern. If they accepted every personal conversion story, then anyone could call themselves a Christian, undercutting their drive toward *true* Christianity. Here they held to the tension, being both wary of subjective experiences and yet repeatedly, incessantly called for true conversion in their writing and preaching.<sup>104</sup> In practice, Pietists felt conversions needed to be evaluated by clergy or truly pious lay leaders.<sup>105</sup>

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101 Donald C. Frisk. "Theology and Experience in Early Pietism." *Covenant Quarterly* Vol. XXVII, no. 1, 2, 3, 4 (1970): 17.

102 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 94.

103 For a full description of Francke's conversion and a thorough treatment of Pietism's unique take on conversion, see Strom, *German Pietism*.

104 Strom, *German Pietism*, loc. 3398. Kindle.

105 Strom, *German Pietism*, loc. 3393; loc. 3396. Kindle.

True conversion would produce true discipleship, a life that is changed and lived differently now that the individual has met Christ and surrendered to him. Francke highlights this when he said, “We do not ask, ‘Are you converted? When were you converted?’ But we ask, ‘What does Christ mean to you? What have you experienced personally with God? Is Christ necessary to you in your daily life?’ And it is, to be certain, very likely that one does not know at all the period of time (of one’s conversion).”<sup>106</sup> So essential to the Pietist is conversion of the whole life that one can only tell if he or she has been converted in retrospect, after a person had died. There is a decisive moment, to be sure, though as with so much of Pietist theology, it must be born out in subsequent action. Thus, the Pietist emphasis on Regeneration.

### *Regeneration*

Regeneration, which the Pietists often called New Birth or Rebirth, was not a new theological idea, but was overlooked and underutilized. The Lutheran Church of the time, following in Martin Luther’s footsteps, highlighted justification over all else. Spener felt that the church would only be reformed by emphasizing regeneration and its subsequent sanctification.<sup>107</sup> While the rest of the Protestant world focused on how one becomes a Christian, Spener highlighted what comes after, the life of increasing holiness and devotion. Don Frisk wrote, “The new birth is the inner center about which other themes are gathered in Spener's thought.”<sup>108</sup> Spener wrote this in *Pia Desideria*, saying, “I regard this as the principle thing. Our whole

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106 Francke, quoted in Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 78.

107 Denise D. Kettering-Lane. “Philipp Spener and the Role of Women in the Church: The Spiritual Priesthood of All Believers in German Pietism.” *Covenant Quarterly* Vol. 75, no. 1 (2017): <https://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/article/view/64>: 5-6.

108 Donald C. Frisk, “Theology and Experience in Early Pietism”: 27.

Christian religion consists of the inner man or the new man, whose soul is faith and whose expressions are the fruits of life.”<sup>109</sup>

Regeneration was the driving theological force of Pietism, not simply as a doctrine but as a vital experience of the Christian.<sup>110</sup> Our new birth must be felt and lived. As Ergon Gerdes wrote, “New Birth, for Spener is marked by a new ‘way,’ a new nature, that slowly replaces the old one. It is a process of growth, a renewing of conduct that is lived out ‘horizontally.’”<sup>111</sup> Here again we see the great convergence of Pietism. The Christian life is one of increasing holiness, which begins at the moment of Justification. And yet, “the ongoing, or regenerative, nature of our faith requires us to be co-participants with Christ through the work of the Spirit.”<sup>112</sup>

Pietists are quick to point out that this comes from faith and is a gift from God. As Clifton-Soderstrom writes, “The doctrine of regeneration allowed Spener, and subsequently other Pietists, to cling to faith alone as the basis of and motivation for action in the ethical life.”<sup>113</sup> We are saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone, without human effort or input. To be fully redeemed, for salvation to work its way through us, we must be changed from the inside out. God graciously gives us an encounter with Jesus, and from that experience we are moved toward Christlikeness.<sup>114</sup> Brown summarizes it well, “In the mysterious process of regeneration there is a moment of complete passivity in a person which gives room to the omnipotent working of God.”<sup>115</sup>

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109 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 116.

110 Bruce Leon Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Thomas Nelson Incorporated, 1995), 329.

111 Ergon W. Gerdes, “Theological Tenets of Pietism”: 28-29. “Horizontally” here meaning our relationships with others.

112 Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 33.

113 Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 33.

114 John Weborg, “Pietism: ‘the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany’”: 15.

115 Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 67.

### *Francke's View of Sanctification*

Considering the earlier discussion of sanctification, it will be helpful to see how Francke treated the subject, an essential piece of the true Christian experience. Francke spent much of his career in higher education at the University of Halle in Germany. He was so convinced that sanctification is a necessary experience for every Christian that he worked it into his teaching. Francke wrote that “in a student of theology one seeks first and foremost to see that his heart is righteous before God.”<sup>116</sup> Learning itself always a pathway sanctification. He criticized individuals who believed that Christianity revolved around “knowledge, opining and babbling, or in lofty speculation” and cautioned against “theological studies in which one seeks to become more learned but not really better or more pious.”<sup>117</sup>

That crucial experience of sanctification starts in rebirth. Rebirth, for Francke, was the energy that gave Christians the ability to be faithful to their covenant responsibilities.<sup>118</sup> In rebirth, Francke, and other Pietists, “found the perfect interplay between passivity before God and activity before the world.”<sup>119</sup> Without it, no faithfulness or sanctification is possible.

Francke believed in a two-step rebirth. Peter James Yoder, in his book on Francke's baptismal theology, describes these two parts: “On one side stood baptismal rebirth, which occurred in the life of the inexperienced and immature and thus lacked lasting efficacy. On the other side stood the rebirth of mature individuals, who recognized their desperate state and

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116 Christian T. Collins Winn et al., *The Pietist Impulse in Christianity* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 100.

117 Winn, *The Pietist Impulse in Christianity*, 100.

118 Peter James Yoder, *Pietism and the Sacraments: The Life and Theology of August Hermann Francke* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 93.

119 Yoder, *Pietism and the Sacraments*, 6.

turned from their worldliness.”<sup>120</sup> Rebirth first happens in baptism, when God welcomes us into his family, and we are completely passive. Rebirth then happens again when we convert, make the conscious choice to follow Jesus in belief and action.

Early in his career, Francke mixed justification and sanctification, almost so that they were a single concept. This led him towards a view of perfectionism that ran contrary to his Lutheran roots. His views on perfectionism did relax later, but he defended the idea strongly. Francke said,

I believe that it is not possible to keep God's commands. So I ask you: Beloved have you even tried?... But if it is unfortunately taught one can not keep God's commands, why wonder that people view it as a new teaching when one insists upon a true Christianity, and testifies that we must become different people with (our) heart, strength, mind, and all powers (as Luther says in his introduction to the letter to the Romans).<sup>121</sup>

This view of perfection was rooted in his enduring emphasis on the command to love God and neighbor. It fell short of an extreme view, however, like later Methodists who hold that perfect sinlessness is possible before death.<sup>122</sup> Later in his life, Francke clarified that he did not believe that perfection possible in this life.<sup>123</sup> Rather, because of rebirth, sin no longer reigns in the heart of the true Christian, who evidence this by their consistent battle against their sinfulness. Francke said, “For all that is born of God overcomes the world, and our faith is the victory, which has conquered the world, and I stand by this.”<sup>124</sup>

Energy from rebirth moved the true Christian toward sinless perfection. This is sanctification and meant, for Francke, ever increasing signs of the Fruit of the Spirit. He was

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120 Yoder, *Pietism and the Sacraments*, 98.

121 Yoder, *Pietism and the Sacraments*, 17.

122 Yoder, *Pietism and the Sacraments*, 17.

123 Yoder, *Pietism and the Sacraments*, 27.

124 Yoder, *Pietism and the Sacraments*, 27.

adamant about that growth. As Yoder explains, “Without such signs of life - without a visible struggle against the work of Satan Francke would not accept that the person was actually reborn.”<sup>125</sup> Sanctification requires that we change and grow.

For Francke and for all Pietists, changes from sanctification happen in a certain direction; it is not random change for change’s sake. We are moved toward Christlikeness in every area of our lives. This is the Pietists’ idea of Completion.

### *Completion*

The life of the Christian is ‘completed’ when it is wholly transformed. Completion is as tied to regeneration as regeneration is tied to conversion. For the Pietist, the process that starts conversion always has a definite direction and orientation. Salvation is an experience of transformation through an encounter with the Holy Spirit by faith, where the believer personally appropriates God’s grace.<sup>126</sup> That personal experience of salvation and faith translates into an individual, lifelong commitment to Christ.

In emphasizing a theology of human completion, Pietists highlight transformation over information. This is the primary goal of God’s revelation to us in Jesus, and his communication through Scripture.<sup>127</sup> Transformation comes from intimate communion with God. We share our deepest selves with all our sin and sinfulness, and we feel the Holy Spirit work there to bring about change for the better. When we are transformed, or rather as we are transforming, we will feel close to him. Quoting Spener, Roger Olson writes, “Pietism was, and at its best is, about inward transformation by God through repentance and faith, which results in renewed affections,

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<sup>125</sup> Yoder, *Pietism and the Sacraments*, 97.

<sup>126</sup> Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 89.

<sup>127</sup> Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 183.

or feelings about God and the ‘things of God.’”<sup>128</sup> While emotions were not the *goal* of Pietism, they were a convincing proof of one’s true conversion and true Christianity. Sanctification toward completion brings our internal life, the realm of both thoughts and feelings, into ever greater conformity with Jesus.

For orthodoxy to lack a lived and felt piety, it amounts to what Pietists called “dead orthodoxy.”<sup>129</sup> Dead orthodoxy is an entirely cerebral faith, with no life change or heart change. It is possible to agree with all correct theology, all right doctrine, all church dogma and yet still not be converted as a follower of Jesus. Pietism “insists that without convertive piety, devotion that arises from and deepens the transforming personal relationship with God in the ‘inner man’, doctrine and theology amount to little more than useless speculation.”<sup>130</sup>

To avoid uselessly speculating about God and achieve completion, Pietists strongly engaged a personal relationship with Jesus. Once again, we see Pietists assert that Christianity is more than mere mental assent to an orthodox idea.<sup>131</sup> The life of faith is primarily about a relationship with a living God who is active in individual’s lives and in the world today. “True Christianity cannot be found in a relationship to God that is wholly mediated by symbols, rituals, institutions, and the like,” writes Olson and Collins Winn. “The true Christian relationship with God may include those, but it cannot be reduced to what they do. It is at its core unmediated, direct, and personal.”<sup>132</sup> This is why the person of Jesus became so central to Pietist theology. Phyllis Tickle draws this out in her introduction to a collection of Pietist writings, saying, “It’s

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128 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 3.

129 Gehrz and Pattie III, *The Pietist Option*, 6.

130 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 183.

131 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 86.

132 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 10.

probably not an exaggeration to say that while ‘Christ’ was central to Pietism, ‘Jesus’... by virtue of being more personal, was more central.”<sup>133</sup> Centered on Jesus, Pietists felt keenly their interpersonal relationship with him.

Pietism’s emphasis on relationship didn’t stop at their relationship with God. Relationships with other people, particularly other Christians, matter a great deal, particularly as the Christian moves toward completion.<sup>134</sup> This is lived out in the Spiritual Priesthood of all believers, one of Pietism’s most-loved tenets. According to Weborg, “No doctrine was more persistently dealt with than the priesthood of all believers, and no effort was spared in attempting to effect a proper use of this doctrine.”<sup>135</sup> This priesthood includes everyone, male and female, and presupposes that each person already possesses gifts from the Holy Spirit and that everyone participates in all aspects of ministry, except the ordination to word and sacrament. All are baptized on equal footing, all take up the yoke with Jesus, and all are commanded to go out into the world to make disciples.

Pietists often mingle together what others might try to keep separate. Is the life of faith primarily about believing or about doing? A Pietist would say “both.” Doing must be a part of a truly Christian life and if it is absent, one would wonder if that person has been converted. But action for its own sake is equally misguided. Spener embodied this tension, knowing that “true belief is not so much felt emotionally as known by its fruits of love and obedience to God,” and that “outer faith without inner life would not do what the evangelistic mission of the church was

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133 Tickle. Phyllis, Forward to *The Pietists: Selected Writings* (Harper Collins, 2006), ix.

134 Gehrz and Pattie III, *The Pietist Option*, 6.

135 C. John Weborg, “Pietism: A Question of Meaning and Vocation.” *The Covenant Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1983): <https://gordonconwell.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000932873&site=ehost-live&scope=site> <http://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/index>: 61.



supposed to do, namely live a life that witnesses to the truth of Christ.”<sup>136</sup> Maintaining the balance and tension of belief and action is the goal of spiritual completion. Gehrz and Pattie summarize this well, “Engaging the heart along with the head was a key emphasis for the early Pietists. It is clear, though, that their ultimate aim was a life transformed... A faith that makes sense in one's head and even brings warm sentiment to the heart is still not a living faith unless it makes a difference in how one lives.”<sup>137</sup> So Believing flows directly into Doing, and, as we will see later, moves into Hoping.

## **Doing**

Pietists were relentlessly practical, and their theology reflected this emphasis. Friederich Christoph Oetinger, a German Pietist who lived from 1702-1782, wrote “All God's ways end in the flesh.”<sup>138</sup> Right belief was only ever the beginning of the Christian life, the first step, with right action following as the second. If true Christianity is walking, a single step is not enough. We must take one step and then a second and then back again, alternating between these essential, foundational legs of belief and action.

As with many aspects of Pietist theology, these two steps were intermingled. Pietists were passionate about profession and practice remaining in congruence. This was seen in Christian's actual lives, not merely in systematized doctrine.<sup>139</sup> Right belief cannot be separated from right action, as one might memorize a poem and recite it by rote. Pietists grounded this ethic in Galatians 5:6, which reads in part, “all that matters is faith active in love.” True, saving faith

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136 Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 76. Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 36.

137 Gehrz and Pattie III, *The Pietist Option*, 71.

138 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 78. Gerdes renders this quotation as “Corporality is the end of all the ways of God,” (Ergon W. Gerdes, “Theological Tenets of Pietism”: 52).

139 John Weborg, “Pietism: ‘the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany’”: 4.

works itself out in love; if loving action is not present, the Pietist wonders if real faith is there. As Weborg writes, “Faith, hope, and love are not just what one has; they are also what one is in relation to others.”<sup>140</sup> Congruence between stated beliefs and actual behavior is where our faith and God’s ways are enfleshed.

Spener emphasized the usefulness of faith. He left behind what he considered the overly philosophical theology of the previous century in favor of an “apostolic simplicity,” emphasizing practical application for the Christian life.<sup>141</sup> “Theology,” he wrote, “is a practical discipline,” and all theological education should be tailored to the practice of faith.<sup>142</sup> This was the third of his six recommendations for reforming the church.<sup>143</sup> Spener and later Pietists’ emphasis on the convergence of belief and doing found unique expression in their ever-present conventicles and their heavy use of the spiritual priesthood of all believers.

### *Conventicles*

Spener’s *collegia pietatis*, or conventicles, represent the Pietists’ mixture of faith and action. While they started as Bible studies for lay people, the small groups became a base of committed Christians actively seeking to live out their faith in ways that improved the lives of their neighbors. These believers had close, personal relationships with Jesus, and those revitalized faiths spread through individual congregations and the broader culture.<sup>144</sup> In the same way that a person is renewed by the work of the Holy Spirit from the inside out, conventicles renewed the Church from the inside.<sup>145</sup>

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140 John Weborg, “Pietism: A Question of Meaning and Vocation”: 59-60.

141 Tappert, “Introduction”: 25.

142 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 105.

143 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 95.

144 Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 326.

145 John Weborg, “Pietism: A Question of Meaning and Vocation”: 62-63.

The Pietist conventicle primarily studied Scripture and prayed together. They would meet a day or so after Sunday worships, and the sermon would be summarized and then discussed.<sup>146</sup> In particular, using what Weborg calls an “activistic reading of Scripture,” the members spent time discussing how that text could be applied to their lives, “how one is to enact and to embody Scripture.”<sup>147</sup> There wasn’t much in the way of ministerial oversight or even direction. These believers gathered for mutual support as they all pursued holiness and godliness together.<sup>148</sup> As Frisk states, in these small groups “little emphasis fell on technical theological issues but rather on practical helpfulness. The goal of these ‘*koinonia*’ groups was the development of personal insight and spiritual maturity in dependence upon the Holy Spirit.”<sup>149</sup>

These conventicles were, ultimately, an exercise in the priesthood of all believers. It was here that lay Christians lived out that theology, caring for each other’s spiritual wellbeing, correcting each other (or even the Pastor!), and encouraging each other.<sup>150</sup> Here was the proving ground where Pietist belief met Pietist action. The Spiritual Priesthood, however, and Pietists’ insistence on an active faith, extended beyond the congregation of believers.

### *The Spiritual Priesthood in Action*

As we saw above, the spiritual priesthood was one of Pietism’s most treated theological positions. Original Pietists, though, may have adapted the Reformation language and called it “the common priesthood of *true* believers.”<sup>151</sup> True believers are members of this fellowship, not

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146 John Weborg, “Pietism: ‘the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany’”: 19.

147 John Weborg, “Pietism: ‘the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany’”: 20.

148 Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Faith That Made the Modern World* (New York: Viking Press, 2017), loc. 2985. Kindle.

149 Donald C. Frisk, “Theology and Experience in Early Pietism”: 27.

150 Donald C. Frisk, “Theology and Experience in Early Pietism”: 27.

151 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 105; emphasis added.

nominal Christians. As the Holy Spirit transforms individual lay people, unique gifts would arise to be used as agents of ecclesial, political, social, or educational change. Pietists put a premium on those gifts, encouraging lay participation in nearly every area of the church. As Spener wrote, all Christians are priests, and are obligated to perform “spiritual-priestly acts,” which he listed out as “prayer, thanksgiving, good works, alms, studying scripture, teaching (those that God has given the grace to teach) especially those under his own roof, chastise, exhort, convert, edify, observe the life of, pray for, be concerned about the salvation of” the Christian’s neighbor and those within their congregation.<sup>152</sup> Francke picked up this emphasis on action; it drove Halle’s hugely diverse ministry field. Under Francke’s direction, the University of Halle became the “engine room of a Pietist revolution.”<sup>153</sup> Embracing experimentation, Halle produced medicines, opened schools, built the largest orphanage in Europe, poured out Pietist tracts in almost every language spoken in Europe, among a variety of other enterprises. He believed a true Christian was one who took risks, lived out a faith that acted in love and lived sure of God’s promises.<sup>154</sup>

This emphasis on action did not slip into works righteousness, however. The Pietists were adamant that every aspect of salvation, including this inward transformation, was God’s work. But they also insisted that God’s work must include whole-life transformation and the implementation of the spiritual gifts God has given.<sup>155</sup> Zinzendorf emphasized this in his preaching, holding that the true Christian, one who is in deep relationship with Jesus, will naturally produce godly actions and make Christ-like decisions.<sup>156</sup> Christians want to please God

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152 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 92.

153 Ryrie, *Protestants*, loc. 2901. Kindle.

154 John Weborg, “Pietism: ‘the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany’”: 17.

155 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 89.

156 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 96.

and will work to do that without compulsion. Brown summarizes the Pietist position well, “Faith grasps God's love through Christ which alone brings about holy actions.”<sup>157</sup>

### *Improving the world*

The Pietist fixation on right action was not limited to interactions between individuals; they had much larger goals. By focusing on improving the lives of the poor in and around the local church, Pietism’s ambition was nothing less than a changed world.

Spener and Francke both emphasized improving the lives of the poor. Spener, in particular, was a pioneer, teaching and leading his congregations to make a positive impact for the needy.<sup>158</sup> Francke took this much further, embodying what Weborg calls the “experimental character of Pietism.”<sup>159</sup> Francke felt a true Christian would be one who took risks on behalf of others and lived out a faith that acted in love and lived sure of God's promises. Relationships would be renewed, and new ministries would be tried, hence Halle’s prolific and varied production.

This spirit that experimented to find new ways to help their neighbor blossomed to encompass the whole world. The Pietists at Halle and Hernhutt were among the first Protestant missionary forces, and they used the same tactics abroad as they did at home. Pietist missions relied on social action to improve the world toward the Kingdom of God.<sup>160</sup> That social action had a broad footprint, including work to “transform the living conditions of the poor and oppressed, reform the prison system, abolish slavery, break down rigid class distinctions, establish a more democratic polity, initiate educational reforms, establish philanthropic

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157 Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 22.

158 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 101.

159 John Weborg, “Pietism: ‘the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany’”: 18.

160 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 100.

institutions, increase missionary activity, obtain religious liberty, and propose programs for social justice.”<sup>161</sup>

This action, both close to home and far afield, was driven by love for their neighbor. Never forgetting their objective of saving souls, Kohl summarizes Pietist missions with the statement, “Transformation of the world through the conversion of man.”<sup>162</sup> They longed for an in-breaking of the Holy Spirit, brining ever-increasing love and peace. This was a particularly potent theology given the vivid memories of the Thirty Years War that were still fresh. Yet, Pietists relentlessly “expected a revolutionary transformation of the world to be accomplished by God's work in changing human lives.”<sup>163</sup>

The Pietists’ emphasis on right belief and right actions that were both congruent with those beliefs and actually improved the world, flows directly out of their third major emphasis: hope for better times.

## **Hoping**

For the Pietist, hope is the foundation upon which right beliefs and right actions are built. Looking for the ways that God is breaking into the world to bring about new life, Pietists “always have hope for better times.”<sup>164</sup> “Hope for better times” is so foundational to Pietism, Spener used the phrase as the subtitle for *Pia Desideria*. Spener’s lofty expectations for what Christians could do and be in the world are easy to see in the *Pia*. He calmly proposed the idea that we ought to be able to have doctrinal controversies well and thought that our fractured

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161 Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 86-87.

162 Manfred Waldemar Kohl, “*Wiedergeburt* as the Central Theme in Pietism”: 13.

163 Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 22.

164 Gehrz and Pattie III, *The Pietist Option*, 8.

Christian church might be able to find a unified common ground. Hope infused Spener's work and carried through all of Pietism.

Hope enlivens the Pietists' orthodoxy and revitalizes their orthopraxy. As Clifton-Soderstrom writes, calling back to the Pietist ethical grounding in Galatians 5, "hope acts in such a way as to give content and context to *faith acting in love*."<sup>165</sup> As Pietists worked out their faith acting in love, their hope manifested itself in specific ways for people, for the church, and for the world.

### *Hope for People*

As is evident from Pietism's theological emphasis on regeneration, they are endlessly hopeful about the condition of the individual Christian. Spener felt that all sermons should be first and foremost encouraging and edifying for those in the congregation, pointing them to the ways they can do and be better through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>166</sup> This comes primarily through God building a good conscience in us.<sup>167</sup> Through the prevenient work of the Spirit, the Christian learns to trust his or her conscience in daily decisions. This makes it possible to participate in a secular world, avoiding sinful activities while taking joy in what is not.<sup>168</sup>

Congruence between thought and action is also a fundamentally hopeful belief. Gehrz and Pattie write, "Pietism reminds Christians who imagine themselves to be people of faith to actually *be* people of faith, to put our hope resolutely in God and live like it."<sup>169</sup> Hope for better times for us individually ought to affect how we live, orienting our lives in an upward direction.

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165 Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 89; emphasis original.

166 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 115.

167 Ergon W. Gerdes, "Theological Tenets of Pietism": 40.

168 Allen C. Deeter. "Pietism, Moralism, and Social Concern." *Covenant Quarterly* Vol. XXXIII, no. 2 (1975): 32.

169 Gehrz and Pattie III, *The Pietist Option*, 37.

Pietists believed that the whole person could, in fact, be transformed, and through a transformed person, whole communities could be transformed.<sup>170</sup>

### *Hope for the Church*

Individual transformation was always the first step for Pietism, but only the first; they intended to renew the entire Church. A firm belief that the Church could become more like the Body of Christ that Scripture imagined inspired widespread renewal.<sup>171</sup> While Pietism was interested in inspiring true Christians, their hope for the church was never about purging false Christians. Spener, like any good preacher, explained with a metaphor:

Like a grain field is never free of weeds, we don't need to strive to have a church totally free of hypocrites. Instead, we should work toward a church that is free of 'manifest offenses,' where those who fail in these ways are corrected or, if they choose to remain in their sins, excluded. In this way, 'the true members of the church should be richly filled with the many fruits of their faith,' such that the weeds will not cover the grain but the grain covers the weeds, making them inconspicuous.<sup>172</sup>

The church will be a truly Christian church when the Fruits of the Spirit are evident and spreading. The Pietistic hope opens us to see where God is growing those fruits, wherever they might be.

### *Hope for the World*

Pietism's hope is thoroughly eschatological, but it is a realized eschatology. Their hope was not simply that one day God would put the world right, but that God was working in this world now to make it right. Pietists believed that they could bring about a close approximation of

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170 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 10.

171 Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 73.

172 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 81.



the Kingdom of God on earth.<sup>173</sup> Their hope was not otherworldly, but, grounded in reality, they sought to redeem the world where they found themselves.<sup>174</sup>

Hope drove the Pietists' mission, both at home and abroad. It was because of their sure conviction that God would one day fully realize his Kingdom on earth that they worked so hard to improve the lives of the poor. Leaning into God's promise of a brighter future for the Church, Spener sought to set the stage for God to work his future into the present.<sup>175</sup> Pietists spread this hopeful message all through Europe and the world, making manifest truly good news.

Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom shares this insight: "people who hope build."<sup>176</sup> Francke embodied this hope thoroughly, building myriad mission endeavors at Halle because they knew they could positively affect the world. Pietists "are fully persuaded that this present age can and will be refashioned and brought into closer accord with the mind of Christ through the continuing work of the Spirit of God," writes Don Frisk.<sup>177</sup> They relied on the unpredictable and essential work of the Spirit in and through the church. Their hope drove them to build upon a strong foundation of Biblical orthodoxy and the integrity of congruent action, all for, as the Pietists themselves would say, "God's glory and neighbor's good."

### **Pietism and Me**

As I've mentioned, I belong to the Evangelical Covenant Church, a Protestant denomination with churches in the United States and Canada. We were founded in the late 19th

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173 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 100.

174 Gehrz and Pattie III, *The Pietist Option*, 29.

175 John Weborg, "Pietism: A Question of Meaning and Vocation": 64.

176 Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 98.

177 Donald C. Frisk, "Theology and Experience in Early Pietism": 28-29.

Century by Swedish Pietists, and that Pietist impulse had a significant effect on our organization and theology. Pietism has had that effect on me, as well.

There are several areas of Pietist theology that I find particularly attractive. I admire their simplicity of doctrine, letting essential Christian theologies take the primary place and allowing secondary issues to be secondary. There is much to be gained from holding unity above uniformity, and many details that could all fall within the realm of orthodoxy. I also appreciate the Pietists' incorporating emotional expression and engagement. Much of my formation came from summer camps, a phenomenon that likely owes its beginning to Pietism. The freedom there to *feel* God and *know* the person of Jesus was key to my conversion and continued growth.

I do, however, find a few areas of concern in the movement's theology. While it is good to include our emotional lives in our faith, I want to expand that include more broadly accepted interactions with our physical and mental health alongside our spiritual and emotional. Pietists also tended to be more morally strict and sometimes heavy handed in their behavioral expectations. I agree with the need to hold each other accountable, and the high bar that Christ set for us. Pietists, however, could sometimes hold cultural mores as divine mandates.

### **Toward a Pietist Homiletic**

Pietism had a unique theological core that was heavily influenced by their drive toward practicality and Bible reading, leading them to emphasize preaching ministry. While some have described Pietists as anti-intellectual, Ergon Gerdes holds that they simply maintained a different theological orientation than Protestant norms of that time. Pietists were more likely to *do* theology, not merely *think* it. "After all," says Gerdes, "Pietists are usually not found behind

lecterns, but in pulpits.”<sup>178</sup> Peter James Yoder would agree, describing Pietism as a “preaching movement” as much as it is a Bible movement.<sup>179</sup>

Given their unique theological emphases described in Chapter 2, we can move toward a Pietist Homiletic.<sup>180</sup> Pietist preaching should embody the same emphases and impulses described above, all with that uniquely Pietist way of doing theology. We will begin by looking at the manner with which a Pietist preaches. It must start with the preacher’s own heart, and then be rigorous, simple, and heartfelt. Then we will discuss the content Pietist sermons would contain, not all at once but over time. These sermons would share the same impulses as their theology, emphasizing believing, doing, and hoping.

## **Manner**

Just as Pietists pushed for congruence between Christian thought and Christian action, Pietist preaching must maintain that same integrity. *How* we preach is just as important as *what* we preach. Pietism suggests a method of preaching that starts with the preacher’s heart, and is rigorous, simple, and heartfelt.

### *Preaching starts with the Preacher*

If the preacher has not truly encountered Jesus in the sermon text, if we do not know it for sure and feel it ourselves that the Holy Spirit has spoken to us, we will not be able to spark that experience in others. Francke left no room for doubt, saying that if a preacher did not love

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178 Ergon W. Gerdes, “Theological Tenets of Pietism”: 53.

179 Yoder, *Pietism and the Sacraments*, loc. 268. Kindle.

180 Through my research, I did not come across any attempts to lay out a uniquely Pietist homiletic. This was surprising to me, considering how often preaching was mentioned in the works I read, and considering that Spener included preaching as one of his six recommendations in *Pia Desideria*. I’ll offer here not an exhaustive or authoritative Pietist Homiletic, but a starting point. Work could be done in reading Francke’s sermons, in particular, to draw out more granular detail in this homiletic.

Christ truly, if the preacher's own heart was not warmed by the text, the sermon "will be apt to be cold and lifeless, and therefore unprofitable and fruitless."<sup>181</sup>

Spener was so convinced of this that he included it in the *Pia*. Pastors must be trained in piety while in seminary, including engaging their own heart in sermon preparation. For Spener, "the preacher must comprehend the miracle of God first, and then pass that along to their people."<sup>182</sup> This experience then becomes the primary means of communication. The preacher's emphasis falls not on his or her powers of persuasion or rhetorical ability, but on the work of Christ in his or her heart. Many preachers, says Spener, can learn the craft of preaching through human effort, and they can do it well. They can teach Biblical information and convey orthodox doctrine. However, these pastors and preachers are "without the working of the Holy Spirit" and are "altogether unacquainted with the true, heavenly light and the life of faith."<sup>183</sup> A preacher that has truly experienced the Holy Spirit and is truly converted and regenerate will be "faithful guides to Christian living as well as faith, basing this all on the word of God contained in Scripture."<sup>184</sup>

Here again we see the Pietists' emphasis on congruence. For preachers to truly move a congregation, they must first be moved themselves. As Gehrz and Pattie say, borrowing a phrase from Spener, "For those in the common priesthood called to preach, proclaiming the Word of God must begin with listening to the Word of God. We must-as we hope those who hear us will-allow it 'to penetrate to the heart.'"<sup>185</sup> We cannot approach the text merely as words on a page, or

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181 Francke quoted in Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 41.

182 K. James Stein, *From Head to Heart: A Compendium of the Theology of Philipp Jakob Spener* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2020), 236.

183 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 46.

184 Stein, *From Head to Heart*, 232.

185 Gehrz and Pattie III, *The Pietist Option*, 106.

else our sermons will be ineffective. If we bring our heart to the words of Scripture and the Word revealed there, the Holy Spirit will faithfully continue that good work in our own souls, which allows us to communicate powerfully to our people.

*Be Rigorous*

Preaching an effective sermon is not a simple task, something Pietists knew well. For Spener, sermons were far too important, and too essential to the improvement of the Church, to be taken lightly.<sup>186</sup> An effective Pietistic sermon is one that is clear, accessible, and understandable. His concern was for the lay people in his church, particularly the uneducated. The Gospel is for them if it is for anyone, and if they can't understand the sermon, they won't hear the good news.

Our sermons must be clear communication, and it is worth honing the craft of preaching to meet that goal. Many books have been written on the craft of preaching; the Pietist preacher must take that self-reflective work seriously for the sake of the message. We must put time and effort into the structure and flow of the sermon so that the clear tone of the Word of God rings out.

There must be no mistake, either, that the Pietist preacher is preaching Scripture. Spener desired “to communicate and make familiar to his hearers the simple message of the Bible.”<sup>187</sup> Though the original Pietists may not have been familiar with the word, they certainly would embrace the tenets of expository preaching. As we seek to communicate what the Holy Spirit has done in us through the text, we must use all our mental and spiritual faculties to ensure we are

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<sup>186</sup> Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 44.

<sup>187</sup> Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 52.

drawing authentic meaning from the Bible. We must be careful to not force our agenda or our ideas onto the Scripture. Pietists are rigorous with both the craft and the content of sermons.

### *Be Simple*

The Pietist drive toward core orthodoxies in our preaching takes the form of pressing toward simple truths. Pietists simplify, particularly when it comes to essential doctrines.<sup>188</sup> Our sermons ought to distill essential doctrines, making them palatable and understandable by the lay people in our specific congregations. For Spener's part, he targeted his preaching at the least educated and most vulnerable people in the congregation, instead of those who could speak Latin or Greek. Throughout his ministry, he found that those who were most vulnerable were often the most faithful followers and the most likely to be truly pious. By edifying them through his preaching, and then by teaching them through conventicles, those in the lowest caste of society became the yeast spread through the whole congregation.<sup>189</sup> To accomplish this, he simplified.

This is not to imply that Christian doctrine is uncomplicated, but rather it represents a drive toward the true purpose of the sermon: renewing and growing true Christianity. Pietists called it an "apostolic simplicity," emphasizing above all else what the Apostles knew from personal experience. Following Jesus requires a close, personal relationship with him.<sup>190</sup> As Gehrz and Pattie write, "Pietism reminds us that the center of our lived faith is not an idea (however true) but a person."<sup>191</sup>

Again, Pietistic preaching is not reductionistic or bland. We would rather not take the bite or the meat out of the text. To the contrary, we ought to give as much good spiritual meat to our

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188 Gehrz and Pattie III, *The Pietist Option*, 7.

189 Jane Chao Pomeroy and Cathy Norman Peterson, "We Are Pietists".

190 Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 32.

191 Gehrz and Pattie III, *The Pietist Option*, 96.

congregation as they can handle, as they grow from the spiritual milk of their early walk with Jesus. To achieve that, however, we call our people to come back to Jesus and to the simple orthodoxies of our salvation, regeneration, and sanctification. If we broach such subjects and get lost in the theological weeds, we will end up leaving our people there with little hope of finding their own way out. Pietists simplify for the sake of our hearers and their comprehension.

### *Be Heartfelt*

Finally, in crafting and delivering our sermon, we must be heartfelt, aiming at the heart of the hearer. Faith lives, as Spener put it, in this inner person. That faith is a gift from God and in energizes and enables the outer person to do the work of God. Preaching must be targeted at the inner person, strengthening faith to produce outer change.<sup>192</sup> Spener writes,

Hence it is not enough that we hear the Word with our outward ear, but we must let it penetrate to our heart, so that we may hear the Holy Spirit speak there, that is, with vibrant emotion and comfort feel the sealing of the Spirit and the power of the Word.<sup>193</sup>

That inner space is the realm of the Holy Spirit. There we find the power to live truly Christian lives, and so we must point our preaching in that direction.

Like many aspects of Pietism, this begins in us. As was method mentioned above, the preacher must first experience God through the text for ourselves before we preach it to another. As Weborg puts it, "People communicate themselves. The communication of the Gospel is to be done faithfully to the Gospel and with the feeling of the Gospel."<sup>194</sup> Again the Pietists' insistence on congruence comes to the fore. We must have a heartfelt experience of Christ before we

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<sup>192</sup> Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 116.

<sup>193</sup> Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 117.

<sup>194</sup> John Weborg, "Pietism: 'the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany'": 20.

attempt to communicate. Without that, we will fail to engender an experience of Christ for our congregants.

This does not happen in a homiletical vacuum, however. Pietists are always practitioners and Pietist preachers must first be pastors. For a sermon to reach the heart of the listener and have an impact there, Pietists, and Spener in particular, insist that the preacher have a strong pastoral relationship with their congregants.<sup>195</sup> Armed with a firm love of our people, with the goodwill that a caring, pastoral relationship affords, we aim at the heart, both our own and those in our churches.

Like Pietism's theology, this manner of preaching is not a checklist to work through, but more of impulses to hone. As we go about crafting sermons week after week, the Pietists' way of preaching becomes engrained in us like a second nature. It starts with our own hearts engaging with the text, and then we will find our sermons to be rigorous, simple, and heartfelt.

## **Content**

In the same way, Pietists did not have a content program that said, "These are the things you must say and these you must not." Rather, the theology Pietists preach comes across as emphases, like using primary colors in a painting. Certain colors drew the Pietists' eye over and over again. The homiletic will take the same shape as our survey of theology above. *What* Pietists preach aligns with believing, doing, and hoping, all intended to grow true Christianity.

### *Believing*

When preaching on what a Christian must believe, a Pietist preacher will focus on those doctrines that make up core orthodoxy. Much in Christian theology is valuable, but not essential. Our sermons ought to consistently emphasize that which is essential to our faith, leaving aside

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195 Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 45.



non-essential theology for other venues. Spener, as we saw above, felt that essential doctrines come from the human experience of salvation: conversion, regeneration, and transformation. They are built on the foundation of the highest regard for Biblical authority and a firm grasp of the Triune God's living activity in the world. This constitutes core doctrine.

While it is best to not let our sermons get dragged down into partisanship or in-fighting, we do not need to avoid controversial topics altogether. There are right ways and wrong ways to think about essential doctrines, and occasionally we must correct or challenge our congregation in that area. For Francke, though, the correction should never be condemning. He wrote, "Admonishing one another need not be done by speaking critically to one another but by speaking in a way that uplifts and encourages another to desire to be good or to respond more faithfully next time."<sup>196</sup>

It is helpful to remember how much Pietists' loved and relied upon the Spiritual Priesthood of all believers. There is an interesting dynamic between a preacher, who is a priest, speaking God's Word to a room full of priests. We must not talk down to or belittle our congregation because in this priesthood, we are all the same. All of us are sheep and Jesus is our shepherd (John 10:11). With this in mind, we preach in humility, wisely sharing our struggles, our need for grace, and the Spirit's transforming work in our own lives. As we do the work God has called us to, we preach to encourage and build up our fellow priests for the work God has them to. Always with the desire to encourage truly faithful discipleship in our listeners, our sermons hone in on those essential doctrines. We can use as a starting point Spener's three areas of human experience: conversion, regeneration, and transformation.

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196 Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 39.

**Conversion.** The life of true discipleship begins with our conversion. Spener wrote, “Preaching should be the divine means to save the people.”<sup>197</sup> With so weighty a calling, we must take conversion seriously and treat it intentionally in our preaching. Conversion was a complicated and multifaceted experience in Pietist thought, as we’ve seen. However, preaching to conversion can be simpler. It begins not with us deciding, but with an understanding that God’s grace worked in us before we could acknowledge it. “While we were still sinners,” Paul writes in Romans 5:8, “Christ died for us.”

Only when we recognize God’s already-present work do we decide to convert. Of course, that decision on the part of the human is essential. Pietists will always emphasize our need to partner in what God is doing. We must choose to convert. Our conversions are not only from atheist to Christian, but a continual kind of conversion, intensifying devotion by moving away from atheism in any area of life and toward true faith that is lived out.

Francke treated conversion in this way, not only as a singular moment of my choice, but a regular re-examination of what Christ means to me. Am I, personally, experiencing God? Is Jesus necessary to my life, to how I live? These questions are fertile ground for Pietist preaching on conversion, both in personal experience and right thinking.

**Regeneration.** The more we consider conversion as both a moment and a life-long process, the more it bleeds into regeneration, which we might also call the new birth. This area is, as we’ve seen, the singular area of focus for Pietist theologians and likely will occupy the lion’s share of a Pietist preacher’s preaching calendar. It is so essential, though, that Spener encourages clergy to not tire of that repetition. “A preacher should not grow weary of

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197 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 116.

*reminding*,” he writes. “In fact, if he has opportunity, he would do well to tell the people again and again in his sermons what they once learned, and he should not be ashamed of so doing.”<sup>198</sup>

Therein is the soul of regeneration, and an excellent summary of Pietist theology. If we *know* it, we ought to then *do* it. In our conversion, God has birthed a new life in us, a new way of life. We must participate in nurturing that new life, progressing in holiness. We participate individually, but not individualistically. Our new birth builds us into a vibrant community, the Body of Christ, the remnant of true Christians in every church. The new birth means a myriad of practical realities, both corporate and individual, to which the Pietist preacher can apply the Gospel.

Once again, we find a tension in Pietist thought and preaching. The work of growing that new life is all God’s grace, and yet, we must partner with him. We must give the Holy Spirit room in our souls in which God can do God’s work.

**Transformation.** We are transformed, or as Spener would say, “completed,” through a personal relationship with Jesus. Just as Pietists would emphasize the person of Jesus over the title of Christ, our preaching ought to center Jesus, a person who wants to be in a relationship with us. Our God is not distant, cold, and far away, but as Paul says in Athens in Acts 17:27, God is “not far from any one of us,” and this God wants us to “seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.” We find God through a personal relationship with Jesus.

Later Pietists in Sweden would often ask the penetrating question, “How goes your walk with Christ?”<sup>199</sup> Viewing our Christian life as a walk with a friend can be a helpful metaphor as we prepare to preach. This kind of intimate relationship goes two ways. It offers open space for

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198 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 116. See Jeffrey Arthurs’ book *Preaching as Reminding* (IVP Academic, 2017) for suggestions on how to “not grow weary” of reminding, as Spener says.

199 Gehrz and Pattie III, *The Pietist Option*, 114.

conversation, for listening and for speaking. There is an intentionality of centering our relationship with Jesus that opens us up to those areas of our lives where we do not walk with him, or where we fear to walk with him. Transformation comes as we walk ever closer with our savior. Ultimately, without that meaningful relationship with God, that walk with Jesus, that intimacy with the Holy Spirit, no amount of right thinking matters.

### *Doing*

For Pietists, a Christian faith is not true belief unless it works itself out in action. True Christianity requires a transformation not only of our interior selves but our exterior lives as well. As Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom stated, Pietists hung significant weight on Galatians 5:6b, “The only thing that counts is faith working through love,” and there gave particular emphasis to the word “working.” She goes on to write that one of Spener’s main concerns for preaching “was doing, or application. He hoped that the congregation would be transformed by the hearing of the Word – that those who heard would then have the capacity, or excellence of character, to apply the good news to their lives.”<sup>200</sup> Spener’s preoccupation with practicality came through into his own preaching and ought to shine in ours.

What must Christians do? We work, as the popular Pietist axiom went, “for God’s glory and neighbor’s good.” For the Pietists, the Christian obligation to action went beyond simply avoiding vices. Many Pietists could be very strict in this regard, but emphasizing action always included both *not doing* harmful things and *doing* helpful things. We must continually remind our congregants that they are gifted members of the spiritual priesthood, essential pieces of the Body of Christ. Each one is gifted for ministry, for doing the good works that God prepared for

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200 Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 44.

us (Ephesians 2:10). To ignore those works would be to squander God's gifts and do harm to our neighbors.

As we live out of our own vibrant personal relationship with Jesus, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit will guide our actions. This is why it is essential that one of the actions we take as true Christians is to join in small group Bible study, and our preaching ought to encourage this. Reading Scripture together will test and try the congruence of what we believe and how we live. When we invite others into vulnerable parts of our lives, in safe and responsible ways, we offer the Spirit another avenue to do that transformative work and give us more chances to work out our own salvation.

For the Pietist preacher, this must extend beyond simply telling our congregation to do good works. We must lead them by example and join in the doing of our faith. Bruce Shelly points out that Pietism brought preaching and pastoral visitation to the center of Protestant ministry, combining the two like sides of a coin.<sup>201</sup> Spener felt this so strongly that he almost seemed to hold the two as equals. He said,

Of what does this (ordained) ministry consist? It consists not only in pure doctrine and preaching of the word, but also in faithful care of the congregation, as the preached word produces fruit among them. To this end belongs also public and private admonition (Ezekiel 3:17-21; Acts 20:31).<sup>202</sup>

However strongly Pietists emphasize the necessity of action for both clergy and laity, we must not allow our sermons to slip into moralizing or works-righteousness. All the will, energy, and ability to do good for our neighbor and glorify God comes from God alone. Spener said that Christians represent Christ to the world "not only with their doctrine and words but also with

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201 Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 329.

202 Spener, quoted in Stein, *From Head to Heart*, 233.

their lives and holy walk, that people see the powerful grace of God which has so sanctified them to the Lord's glory.”<sup>203</sup> God’s powerful grace is effective in our lives, as evidenced by our works, and that is a powerful testimony to the world.

### *Hoping*

Just as God’s grace effectively brings about change in an individual life, so too will God’s grace bring about better times in the world. Pietists’ hope orients our homiletical work and directs it to the good ends that God designed for the world. We set the stage for God's Kingdom to come more fully into the world, and that is Good News. So good is the coming Kingdom and its in-breaking now that we ought to feel fundamentally hopeful about our situation and the world’s condition.

This does not mean we ignore or downplay the world’s most dire circumstances in our sermons. On the contrary, Christian hope takes those circumstances seriously and shines out brighter because of the darkness. Zinzendorf stands as an example for us in this. He felt that the Christian life ought to be joyful, even as he was mobilizing one of the first world-wide mission forces. They brought joyfulness to the most abject and marveled at the work God did there.

As we preach, we preach sermons full of hope, always with an eye toward encouragement. K. James Stein wrote of the Pietists’ goal, “In preaching, to seek nothing other than the edification of the congregation.”<sup>204</sup> Through encouragement, we orient ourselves to the inexorable forward march of the Kingdom of God. God is always advancing his Kingdom, bringing with it justice and peace, life, and light. We must keep an eye out for places where God

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203 Spener quoted in Stein, *From Head to Heart*, 237.

204 Stein, *From Head to Heart*, 238.

is breaking in and preach about it. God not only *can* do good works in our lives and in our world, he *will*. It is as sure a hope as we can have (Hebrews 11:1).

A Pietist homiletic, like Pietism itself, urges congruence and integrity between the spoken word and the lived life. The homiletic begins with the preacher encountering Jesus in Scripture and suggests a manner of sermon preparation that is rigorous, simple, and aims at the heart of the listener. Just as Pietism comes across as a set of impulses or emphases, our homiletic is not a checklist but a heartbeat. The emphatic beats in the Pietists' sermons are right belief that centers on core doctrines such as conversion, regeneration, and transformation, followed by right action, all full of hope that God will continue to do God's work. Ultimately, the sermon is for God's glory and our neighbor's good.

### **What Might Pietism Say to Us Today?**

Through Pietism, renewal and revitalization worked through Europe and America and then the entire world. It helped to shape American Revivalism and modern Evangelicalism. Pietism may have fallen by the wayside of history, earning just a few pages in the modern retelling of the Church, but we might find gems of truth for our current ecclesial contexts. We saw in Chapter 1 the discouraging state of the American Church, and the unique opportunity that preachers have to address it. Given its historical context and core theology, and given how essential preaching is to our modern American churches, what might Pietism offer to preachers today? This is the question I will test, as we will see in Chapter 4. Next, we turn to a literature review to gain an understanding of the landscape of thought around spiritual maturity, preaching to spiritual growth, and how Pietists viewed preaching.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

With the problem stated and a theological foundation laid, we turn our attention now to current research. This chapter situates this thesis-project among recent scholarly work on the intersection of preaching and spiritual growth. We will cover three areas: First, two Doctor of Ministry theses performed studies similar to mine on the effectiveness of preaching for spiritual growth. Second, we will hear what modern homileticians have to say on preaching with the goal spiritual growth. Finally, with a grasp of Pietist theology in hand, we will see what Pietists thought about preaching and its role in the Church.

#### **Similar Studies**

Preaching's role in the spiritual growth of a congregation is an area rich in potential. Two Doctors of Ministry theses are of particular relevance to my study. David Wells wrote "The Spirituality of Preaching: Exploring the Relationship Between the Spiritual Formation of the Preacher and the Spiritual Formation of the Congregation" at Asbury Theological Seminary. Curtis Barbarick produced "Preaching that Leads to Transformation At The North Street Church of Christ in Nacogdoches, Texas" at Abilene Christian University. Both studies are examples of research into different aspects of preaching that are effective in producing spiritual maturity.

Wells' thesis investigated the link between the preacher's own spiritual maturity and the congregation's growth. He suggested that "the spiritual formation of the preacher is a principal activity," and ought to be intentionally considered alongside exegesis and other sermon preparation.<sup>1</sup> He designed a study of three Methodist pastors in the western Ohio over an eleven-

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<sup>1</sup> David Wesley Wells, "The Spirituality of Preaching: Exploring the Relationship Between the Spiritual Formation of the Preacher and the Spiritual Formation of the Congregation" (Doctor of Ministry, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2015): 4.



week period. It involved pre-interviews and post-interviews as the participants engaged in intentional spiritual practices designed to grow the preacher spiritually, to see if that increased the perceived spiritual growth in the congregation. Each of the three churches held focus groups with congregants during the test period. All data gathered was qualitative, based on those focus groups and interviews with the pastors.<sup>2</sup>

The results of Wells' study partially affirmed his thesis. The preacher's spiritual growth is an important consideration, but the evidence indicated that it cannot be "elevated to the highest level of priority."<sup>3</sup> The three pastors did not subjectively notice a significant increase in their own growth through more frequent spiritual practices. Wells notes:

However, two focus groups [of lay people] reported observing a considerable change with respect to their pastor's approach to reading the Scriptures. Participants witnessed a greater level of confidence and authority in their pastor's delivery of the sermon, as well as noticeable comfort in standing before the congregation. Additionally, several persons described how their pastor had become bolder in preaching on controversial subjects, while demonstrating greater insights into the meaning of the Scriptures.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, a spiritually growing pastor affected worship in unexpected ways.

One of Wells' interesting insights has to do with perception. The three congregations knew that their pastors were engaging in intentional spiritual practices, leading them to see spiritual growth in their pastors even when the pastors themselves did not feel it.<sup>5</sup> This also helped the congregants to remark positively on the preaching. The same was true in reverse. The focus groups did not see their own spiritual growth, but the pastors commented on it in their interviews. This speaks to the importance of vulnerability for the pastor, in preaching and all life,

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2 Wells, "The Spirituality of Preaching": 11.

3 Wells, "The Spirituality of Preaching": 133.

4 Wells, "The Spirituality of Preaching": 128.

5 Wells, "The Spirituality of Preaching": 141.

modeling a living faith for the sake of their congregation. Wells displayed an important link between pastors' spiritual growth and their congregation's. Where Wells focused on a preacher's *maturity*, my thesis will analyze the link between a preacher's *content* and a congregation's spiritual growth.

Barbarick noted a similar problem within his local church that I described in Chapter 1, which he calls a lack of transformation. Preaching was not bringing about the kind of discipleship he expected.<sup>6</sup> Among his denomination, the Churches of Christ, and in his congregation, some felt that transformation was unnecessary or unimportant because of God's grace. So, Barbarick designed a project intended to "implement a process that would enhance the listeners' experience of the sermon for the purpose of transformation."<sup>7</sup>

That process involved finding ways for the listener to prepare to hear the sermon individually and communally engage with the content over a six-week period.<sup>8</sup> Listeners would first engage in *lectio divina*, a spiritual practice and method of reading scripture, utilizing the sermon text for Sunday. After the sermon, participants would meet to share their experiences in *lectio divina* and the sermon. The group identified specific actions from the sermon they could implement in the next week. Barbarick sought to bring about transformation by augmenting the sermon with small groups, something Pietists would heartily endorse.

Through personal observation, a questionnaire, and an outside interviewer, Barbarick found that this particular combination of personal Bible reading, intentional small group study, and active implementation did, in fact, produce transformation.<sup>9</sup> The results "indicate that the

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6 Curtis Barbarick, "Preaching That Leads to Transformation At the North Street Church of Christ in Nacogdoches, Texas" (Doctor of Ministry, Abilene Christian University, 2014): 5.

7 Barbarick, "Preaching That Leads to Transformation": 7.

8 Barbarick, "Preaching That Leads to Transformation": 8.

9 Barbarick, "Preaching That Leads to Transformation": 110.

participants in the project grew in their relationship with God and developed in holiness as much as one might reasonably expect in a period of six weeks. This was demonstrated in an internal change as well as in a life change.”<sup>10</sup> Those who engage with Scripture on their own alongside a sermon and who find communal encouragement to implement something in their daily lives discover the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. This is certainly an idea that Pietists would wholeheartedly accept. My study looks to see if bringing out particular Biblical themes through preaching aids this transformation.

Both studies validate Pietism as a resource for modern preachers. Pietists place a high value on the pastor’s spiritual growth, and on the essential nature of small groups for a congregation’s health. These theses indicate that there is still work to be done. Could the content of a sermon through a set of theological emphases bring about spiritual growth? That’s what this thesis-project intends to test. We will now turn our attention to the broader homiletical landscape to see what has been said about that question.

### **Preaching for Spiritual Growth**

The spiritual growth of listeners is generally agreed upon as a primary goal of preaching, though not universally. Listener application is a regular topic in textbooks and articles, with the assumption being that applying the sermon will lead toward spiritual growth. Here we will see first where homileticians agree and disagree about the goal of preaching. Second, we’ll look at the general agreement on the methods of accomplishing this goal. Finally, two authors’ unique proposals are germane to this topic.

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10 Barbarick, “Preaching That Leads to Transformation”: 112.

## Growth is the Goal of Preaching

Effective sermons are a means of moving a listener and a congregation toward maturity in right belief, action, and hope. This is as central a tenet of preaching as anything. For Scott Gibson, this focus must eclipse other concerns. He writes, “Preaching must not be as concerned with form, structure, philosophies, or even theologies—as important as these may be or are—as it is with the presupposition that it is shaping learners on their way to maturity in Christ.”<sup>11</sup> Equipping Christians for ministry, encouraging them to live mature lives of faith, must be at the forefront of our minds every time we gather for worship. Gibson makes this point well,

We engage in what we do for the growth of men and women and boys and girls in the faith. We want to stretch believers to expand their faith and obedience as they grow in grace. Our goal is Christlikeness, and we know that believers in Jesus Christ will mature in their faith through faithful sermon planning and the preaching of God's Word.<sup>12</sup>

Ben Patterson makes the case, however, that worship ought to be the one true goal of preaching. He draws this from Ephesians 1:12, where Paul states that Christians are to “live for the praise of his [Christ’s] glory.” This, for Patterson, is the only goal of preaching, not growth, not repentance, not even conversion. “Sermons are to be preached,” he writes, “so that the hearers might praise, adore, and give thanks to God... They are preached so that men and women should repent and believe the gospel *so that they may praise God's glory*.”<sup>13</sup> This is a healthy challenge for us. In an age where we can, as Dallas Willard laments, become overly reliant on

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11 Scott M. Gibson, *Preaching With a Plan: Sermon Strategies for Growing Mature Believers* (Baker Books, 2012), 29.

12 Gibson, *Preaching With a Plan*, 13.

13 Ben Patterson, “Why the Sermon?” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 217; emphasis original.

“devices and programs” that can distract us from worship, preachers need the corrective reminder to keep praise central.<sup>14</sup>

We must ourselves be growing in Christlikeness to preach so God’s people grow through worship, but this alone is not enough. I have already established that the inner life of the preacher is essential for producing spiritual growth in congregants. This was supported by David Wells’ thesis and is well attested in homiletics literature. But the preacher must do more than attend to his or her own soul to produce transformation toward maturity. Homileticians in my research were remarkably consistent in their recommendations for how to grow people spiritually.

### **How to Spiritually Grow People**

The literature commonly noted four elements preaching that produce spiritual maturity. Robertson McQuilkin provides this suggestion: “Practically speaking, how do we make sure our preaching results in spiritual transformation? I suggest four indispensables. Our preaching should be Bible-based, Spirit-energized, verdict-demanding, and audience-connected.”<sup>15</sup> Adams draws up a nearly identical list: “So then, preaching necessarily involves: 1. Content, in the form of a biblical message; 2. A preacher; 3. An occasion (in which I include time and place); 4. Listeners; 5. The Holy Spirit.”<sup>16</sup> We will leave aside the time and place and focus on four necessary features of a sermon that promotes spiritual maturity, the right belief, action, and hope found in Scripture. That sermon must be 1) Bible-based, 2) listener-centered, 3) action-oriented, and 4) require the intervention of the Holy Spirit.

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14 Dallas Willard, “A Cup Running Over,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 72.

15 Robertson McQuilkin, “Spiritual Formation Through Preaching,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 48.

16 Jay E. Adams, *Preaching With Purpose: The Urgent Task of Homiletics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), loc. 239. Kindle.

### *Bible-based*

I explained above the need for Scripture to determine the content of our sermons. What we can add here to my comments, though, is the need to *deeply* engage with Scripture. Beyond the simple need to talk about the Bible, it must actually function as the “controlling center” of our sermons and spiritual formation.<sup>17</sup> Gibson says, “Those whom we disciple through preaching deserve more than surface comments on a text.”<sup>18</sup> McQuilkin adds that for a sermon to be truly effective, we must keep every word “under the functional authority of Scripture. It is true to the meaning of Scripture, true to the emphases of Scripture, true to the purpose of Scripture.” A Biblically based sermon is one that seeks to accomplish the same purpose that the Holy Spirit determined in its inspiration.<sup>19</sup>

The Bible’s utmost importance for spiritual growth is supported by and expanded upon in Willow Creek’s “Reveal” study of congregational health. Prompted by a desire to know if they were actually effective in making disciples who follow Jesus, Willow Creek began a study in 2003 of their own congregation, a megachurch with several campuses in the Chicago suburbs.<sup>20</sup> Their results, and subsequent studies of over a thousand other churches with over 250,000 individuals, revealed insights into what produces spiritual growth. They found engaging Scripture to be paramount for producing true disciples, writing:

Nothing has a greater impact on spiritual growth than reflection on Scripture. If churches could do only one thing to help people at all levels of spiritual maturity grow in their relationship with Christ, their choice is clear. They would inspire, encourage, and equip their people to read the Bible—specifically, to reflect on Scripture for meaning in their

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17 McQuilkin, “Spiritual Formation Through Preaching,” 48.

18 Gibson, *Preaching With a Plan*, 24.

19 Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, loc. 532. Kindle.

20 Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 14.

lives. The numbers say most churches are missing the mark —because only one out of five congregants reflects on Scripture every day.<sup>21</sup>

To accomplish this, the study’s authors Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson recommend embedding the Bible in every aspect of the church, and, in particular, sermons. Scripture must be “the central and highest value guiding church direction and priorities,” impacting and influencing every aspect of ministry.<sup>22</sup> The Biblical message must be central in preaching, as well, the “main course” of the sermon.<sup>23</sup> In order to produce spiritually engaged and growing disciples in our congregations, preachers need to bring the core Scriptural message to bear on people’s lives and then encourage them to immerse themselves in Scripture the rest of the week. Hawkins and Parkinson write, “Truly, if a church could do only one thing to help people grow in their relationship with Christ, it would be to get them immersed and in love with God's Word.”<sup>24</sup> This certainly supports my thesis that preaching emphasizing certain Biblical and Theological ideas will spark spiritual growth. Perhaps, though, it challenges that *any* Biblical emphases would move listeners in that direction.

### *Listener-centered*

To fully accomplish what the Holy Spirit intends, we must deliberately preach to be heard and understood. This requires us to be listener-centered, to see our congregants as more than merely “listeners,” but as believers, disciples, and followers of Jesus.<sup>25</sup> To preach so that our sermons spark growth, we need to see the people in the pews as more than simply ears for our

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21 Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 19.

22 Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 219.

23 Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 221.

24 Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 223.

25 Gibson, *Preaching With a Plan*, 18.

words to enter. For Adams, using our sermon to encourage as well as inform is so foundational to preaching that anything less is merely lecturing.<sup>26</sup>

A listener-centric sermon must aim at the heart, not only the head. Preaching that grows takes the Biblical message and aims it in such a way so it will be experienced and felt. As Lawrenz says, “Preaching is translation, carrying a message across a distance. Preaching should enter people’s heart. Otherwise, there is not a chance it will be formative.”<sup>27</sup> To preach effectively, we explain the Biblical text and use that text to engage the heart.<sup>28</sup> We are emotional creatures, and we remember and assign importance to what we feel.

We also are more likely to consider a message important if it is relevant. In fact, as Arthurs comments, “We find it nearly impossible to give attention for an extended period of time to anything that seems irrelevant.”<sup>29</sup> If we want our preaching to bring our congregation closer to Christlikeness, they must see how Christlikeness connects to the issues they are facing. That includes personal issues and pressing societal concerns.<sup>30</sup> A Biblical message that speaks to the things our people care about has good potential to be spiritually formational.

Listener-centric sermons speak the listeners’ cultural language. Preachers must be aware of culture’s subconscious, foundational belief system and how Scripture compares and contrasts with it.<sup>31</sup> Occasionally, that belief system is so embedded that we must call it out in the sermon to help our people understand themselves better. To accomplish this, we “translate the message into

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26 Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, loc. 848. Kindle.

27 Mel Lawrenz, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation* (Baker Books, 2000), 66.

28 Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (Penguin, 2015), loc. 549. Kindle.

29 Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding*, loc. 610. Kindle.

30 Lawrenz, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation*, 67.

31 Keller, *Preaching*, loc. 310. Kindle.



contemporary language and thought forms.”<sup>32</sup> As our congregants know themselves better, they can better see what Christ is calling them to leave behind and move toward in spiritual maturity.

Listener-centric preaching is aimed at the heart, has contemporary relevance, and is culturally aware. All of this supports the goal of promoting spiritual growth. McQuilkin notes how this follows the pattern that Jesus set, saying, “Jesus didn’t drop in for a few weeks in a celestial bubble and talk celestialese. He became one with us.”<sup>33</sup> It is our responsibility as preachers to become one with our congregation, getting inside “the head, indeed, inside the heart of his [or her] audience and communicate in thoughts and words that can be understood, that connect.”<sup>34</sup>

#### *Action-oriented*

The proof of a sermon that connects is in the action it produces, specifically a change to more Christlike action. We preach to the heart in culturally sensitive ways so that our people take the truth into themselves and act accordingly. As Arthurs notes, this is what Biblical authors intended: “In the Bible, emotion and volition link arms with cognition as memory brings the past into the present with compelling power, producing appropriate behavior.”<sup>35</sup> McQuilkin points to this as every preacher’s aim, if we’re to actually produce growth. He says, “What we’re after is change. If the audience leaves stirred or more Biblically literate but doesn’t change, there’s been no spiritual formation.”<sup>36</sup> Without an increase in Christlike action, no growth has happened.

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32 McQuilkin, “Spiritual Formation Through Preaching,” 52.

33 McQuilkin, “Spiritual Formation Through Preaching,” 53.

34 McQuilkin, “Spiritual Formation Through Preaching,” 53.

35 Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding: Stirring Memory in an Age of Forgetfulness* (InterVarsity Press, 2017), loc. 347. Kindle.

36 McQuilkin, “Spiritual Formation Through Preaching,” 52.

This includes action in two directions: ceasing sinful works and continuing holy ones. Adams writes, “Sinful patterns can be adequately changed only by replacing them with the biblical alternatives to them.”<sup>37</sup> For our preaching to move people to spiritual maturity, we have to convict of sin, offer the holy alternative, and suggest a means to achieve it, all with an appropriate balance between God’s grace and our responsibility.<sup>38</sup> Jay Kesler writes, “When we preach the gospel faithfully, it results in mission, outreach, and evangelistic desire. It has both a vertical dimension of salvation and a horizontal, social dimension of practical charity.”<sup>39</sup> Preaching toward growth means encouraging practical expressions of faith. My study highlights this, as Pietism heavily emphasized practical piety.

### *Necessity of the Holy Spirit*

Without the intervention of the Holy Spirit, none of the rest of this matters. Only when God works do people grow. In the end, as Gibson says, “the ultimate responsibility for maturity of individuals and of the church is the Lord’s. The Lord is the one who through his grace enables us to grow in him.”<sup>40</sup> McQuilkin paints a vivid picture, saying, “Unless the fire of the Spirit breaks loose, we can forget about spiritual formation.”<sup>41</sup>

Two authors concerned primarily with spiritual formation agree that preaching is a mode of God’s work. Mel Lawrenz says, “What really matters [in preaching] is whether people are genuinely encountering God through his Word in a way that forms their lives.”<sup>42</sup> McQuilkin

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37 Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, loc. 2136. Kindle.

38 Keller, *Preaching*, loc. 662. Kindle.

39 Jay Kesler, “Overfed, Underchallenged,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 32.

40 Gibson, *Preaching With a Plan*, 68.

41 McQuilkin, “Spiritual Formation Through Preaching,” 50.

42 Lawrenz, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation*, 64.

holds that not just any kind of public speech about God will do. He writes, “But Holy Spirit anointed preaching is the means that seems best designed to aid spiritual formation.” Preaching is a means of spiritual growth, and it supports the broader work God is doing in the lives of His disciples.

This kind of preaching is dependent on the preacher’s vibrant relationship with God.

McQuilkin makes this clear:

It’s possible to fascinate a congregation so that numbers steadily increase, to explain the Bible text so professionally one’s reputation reaches back to the halls of alma mater, to inform the mind so carefully our people are recognized as Bible experts, and still to miss out on spiritual formation. Without the energizing power of the Spirit, fresh each time one enters the pulpit, our people will not demonstrate any miracle quality of life.<sup>43</sup>

Relying on the Holy Spirit is an important foundational idea for my thesis-project.

Emphasizing a specific set of Biblical concepts very well might lead to the kind of “congregational fascination” McQuilkin warns about. Pietists, however, would agree with him, and that undergirds my study.

Spiritual formation is God’s work, and preachers are partners in it. J. Kent Edwards expresses the urgency he feels in preaching, writing, “I preach because knowledge of God is the most important knowledge a person can have. People cannot live without it. They *must* learn about God.”<sup>44</sup> We have a responsibility to direct that learning along appropriate paths, challenging and stretching our people in healthy ways. In this, “preaching is a means of discipleship, a shaping of men and women into the people God wants them to be — growing, deep believers able to face the world in which they live because they have been nurtured to do so

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43 McQuilkin, “Spiritual Formation Through Preaching,” 50.

44 J. Kent Edwards, *Deep Preaching: Creating Sermons That Go Beyond the Superficial* (B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 22; emphasis original.

by the Word.”<sup>45</sup> God does the work and we are participants, tasked with preaching Bible-based, listener-centered, and action-oriented sermons that spark spiritual growth.

## Two Unique Proposals

Broad agreement exists within homiletical literature on growth toward spiritual maturity as the goal of preaching, and on the methods of achieving that growth. However, two authors offered unique and compelling suggestions in this realm. First, Richard Lovelace wrote in *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* of the necessity of preaching on justification and sanctification in particular. Second, Michael Quicke, writing in *Preaching as Worship*, argues that preaching must be kept in the context of a worship service to produce Christlike disciples.

### *Preaching justification and sanctification*

Lovelace’s book, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, is a broad treatise on personal spiritual renewal, and he recognizes that preaching holds an important place in that project. For most congregations, preaching and teaching is the ministry in which renewal begins.<sup>46</sup> Lovelace suggests that our preaching has been lopsided and overly focused on God’s love, excluding justification and sanctification. We must include those theological focal points so that “the grace of God can be both intelligible and credible for the individual believer.”<sup>47</sup> Without it, renewal among our congregations is hampered.

The flaws apparent in Christian behavior or a lack of sanctification, writes Lovelace, stems from uncertainty about justification.<sup>48</sup> Those who are not sure that God accepts them in

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45 Gibson, *Preaching With a Plan*, 17.

46 Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (InterVarsity Press, 2020), 206.

47 Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 207.

48 Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 207-08.

Christ alone, quite apart from any works, are likely to be radically insecure. They work for spiritual achievements even as they hear about God's grace because they don't truly understand it. This then leads to misfired, malformed, or inconsistent sanctified actions.

To produce true disciples growing in sanctification, we must teach and preach on justification by grace. We ought to resist the temptation to berate or come down hard on our congregation's misdeeds. Lovelace believes "it is often necessary to convince sinners (and even sinful Christians) of the grace and love of God toward them, before we can get them to look at their problems. Then the vision of grace and the sense of God's forgiving acceptance may actually cure most of the problems."<sup>49</sup> Winning people over with God's winsome grace leads to personal renewal and spiritual growth.

This all fits quite well in a Pietist theological and homiletical framework. While Pietists could be quite strict in their moral expectations, it was grounded in a firm grasp of God's goodness and forgiveness. The key is a continuing, active, and intimate relationship with Jesus. Lovelace, in fact, quotes Francke in this regard, an idea of his that has already been referenced. Francke did not feel the need to identify a particular moment of conversion or even to ask, "Have you been converted?" Rather, Francke and Pietists after him asked, "Is Christ important to you in your daily life?"<sup>50</sup> This relationship leads to increasing victory over sin, a sign of a regenerate, renewed Christian.

### *Preaching as a part of worship*

Michael Quicke's book *Preaching as Worship* argues forcefully that preaching is best considered one aspect of a congregation's worship life. Patterson, as we saw above, suggests that

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<sup>49</sup> Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 208.

<sup>50</sup> Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 209-10.

worship ought to be the primary goal of preaching, and Quicke might agree. However, *Preaching as Worship* pushes this idea and proposes that spiritual growth in our congregation comes best through a full understanding of preaching as an act of worship. Quicke writes,

Preaching remains essential for God's formation of Christ-shaped people and communities because it enables biblical speaking, listening, seeing, and doing like nothing else. Yet it belongs within the breadth of worship's dynamic as God gives— we receive— we respond— God receives. In the totality of worship, God's Word is revealed, proclaimed, and obeyed.<sup>51</sup>

Preaching is the primary means through which God shows himself to his people, but it is not the only means. God's Word is proclaimed in many aspects of worship liturgy, from the reading of Scripture, to song, to call and response, and so on.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, preaching also accomplishes the main goal of worship, which Quicke says is to seek God's glory.<sup>53</sup> He suggests a circular dynamic in worship, citing Isaiah 55:11, which reads, "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." In worship, God's revealed Word in Christ is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit impacts and affects hearers according to the Spirit's purposes, and then those affected return glory to God in praise.<sup>54</sup>

Preaching plays a role in both the out-going of the Word and the returning of praise. As Quicke says, "Preaching is an offering made to God by preachers, yet it simultaneously addresses the congregation on behalf of God."<sup>55</sup> Worship is what binds it together. Preachers and

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51 Michael J. Quicke, *Preaching as Worship: An Integrative Approach to Formation in Your Church* (Baker Books, 2011), 74.

52 Quicke, *Preaching as Worship*, 84.

53 Quicke, *Preaching as Worship*, 59.

54 Quicke, *Preaching as Worship*, 71.

55 Quicke, *Preaching as Worship*, 73.

listeners worship in and through a sermon, and all worship as they respond to it. Worship is the “integrator of preaching within God’s big picture.”<sup>56</sup>

Again, this fits well into a Pietist mindset and advances the Pietists’ lively worship practices. The sermon was never considered the only way God spoke to his people, as evidenced by their continual insistence on reading scripture at home and gathering for weekly corporate worship services. Worship engages a person’s entire self, an important aspect of Pietist thought. When the entire self is engaged, spiritual growth toward Christlike maturity happens.

Modern scholarship broadly agrees that preaching’s goal is spiritual growth. Wells’ and Barbarick’s theses showed that the spiritual growth of the preacher and the use of small groups with preaching both support the spiritual growth of the congregation. Homiletics suggest that growth comes from Bible-based, listener-centered, action-oriented sermons that rely on the Holy Spirit to bring about the growth. Lovelace encourages us to preach on justification and sanctification to produce growth, and Quicke argues that our preaching ought to take place as an act of worship within a corporate worship environment. All of this points to Pietism as a potential resource for our preaching.

### **Pietism and Preaching**

The intersection of Pietism and preaching is the center of this thesis-project’s research question. Chapter 2 described a Pietist homiletic based on the movement’s theological foundations. Now, however, it will be beneficial to see the role of preaching within the movement.

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56 Quicke, *Preaching as Worship*, 73.

Pietism brought preaching to prominence in their worship services.<sup>57</sup> It captured Pietists' attention throughout the movement's lifespan, leaving a lasting impact on later Protestant generations. Jonathan Strom writes about preaching's importance, saying, "Sermons remained one of the leading literary genres of the movement's theologians. Both John Wesley and August Hermann Francke relied heavily on sermons rather than theological treatises to disseminate their theology."<sup>58</sup> The sermon was the perfect blend of Pietism's relentless pursuit of practicality and firm focus on the lay Christian. Pastors could count on people being in church to hear a sermon when they could not necessarily rely on their congregants reading theology books at home. Thus, pastors must work to make their sermons effective tools of furthering the Kingdom of God within the hearts and lives of their listeners. This is why Francke spent the time to write a letter to describe, in his words, "how a faithful minister, who earnestly desires to save and to edify the souls of his hearers, to gain sinners unto Christ, and to inflame their hearts with a growing love to their Savior, may best adapt his preaching to these excellent purposes."<sup>59</sup>

Philipp Jacob Spener, Pietism's founder, argued passionately for increasing the sermon's place and effectiveness. Throughout his ministry, Spener urged his fellow pastors to be serious about their preaching, using sermons to inspire right belief in their congregants and encourage them in the faith at every opportunity.<sup>60</sup> His book *Pia Desideria* was aimed at church renewal on a grand scale, and preaching was an essential part of that. Spener's sixth and final

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57 Jonathan Strom, "Pietism and Revival," in *Preaching, Sermon and Cultural Change in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Joris Van Eijnatten (Boston: Brill, 2009), 173.

58 Strom, "Pietism and Revival," 173.

59 Francke quoted in O. C. Edwards Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), 71.

60 K. James Stein, *From Head to Heart: A Compendium of the Theology of Philipp Jakob Spener* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2020), 4.



recommendation for church renewal dealt with sermons, that “everything in [the pastor’s] sermons should have edification as the goal.”<sup>61</sup>

For Spener, this started in the seminary. To reform the Church, he wanted to first reform the academy. As theological students are trained, special attention should be given to the practical side of ministry, to comforting the sick, teaching, and especially preaching.<sup>62</sup> People needed help to live out the grand theologies they heard from the pulpit. Too often, however, the preacher was not concerned with the listener, but with the academic exercise of preaching, the rhetorical task. Spener writes, “Many preachers are more concerned to have the introduction shape up well and the transitions be effective, to have an outline that is artful and yet sufficiently concealed, and to have all the parts handled precisely according to the rules of oratory and suitably embellished, than they are concerned that the materials be chosen and by God's grace be developed in such a way that the hearers may profit from the sermon in life and death.”<sup>63</sup>

Preaching for the Pietists was about much more than mere oratory. For Spener and later Pietists, “Preaching should be the divine means to save the people.”<sup>64</sup> It is best directed to “ordinary people” and not the “few learned people in the congregation.”<sup>65</sup> Spener embodied this idea. He was not a fiery preacher or a rhetorical genius, quite the opposite, in fact. Yet, he preached powerfully. As O.C. Edwards writes, “His presence in the pulpit [was] as one who believed implicitly in what he said, his ‘whole face reflecting a serene tranquility with

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61 Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), 115.

62 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 115.

63 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 115.

64 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 116.

65 Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 116.

kindness.”<sup>66</sup> As we saw above, congruence between inner and outer life was essential to Pietism, and that extended to preaching as well.

Spener’s work in *Pia Desideria* includes what would become the hallmarks of Pietistic preaching. Strom lists them out: “An emphasis on *Erbauung* (building up of faith) and speaking from the heart, the importance of the preacher’s character, a distaste for rhetorical formalism, and criticism of excessive learnedness in the pulpit that distracts from the greatest rule of preaching—the salvation of one’s parishioners.”<sup>67</sup> To this list, I would add their intense focus on Scripture as the content of the sermon.

Pietists held Scripture in the highest regard, and this carried over to their preaching as well. Pietists were strictly expository preachers, though they may not have used that term, and were suspicious of thematic or topical preaching. Strom writes, “The Pietists were critical of... sermons that would introduce a theme that would be explored throughout the regular sermons of the year, arguing that it required the preacher to bend the texts to his needs.”<sup>68</sup> Pietists wanted the truth of Scripture and nothing else in their preaching, and sought that truth through exegetical work and discernment with the Holy Spirit.<sup>69</sup> Always, Pietism’s preachers kept in view the edification of their congregation and knew Biblical truth to be the key to that nourishment.

As Spener embodied, Pietists believed that good preaching starts within the preacher’s own soul. Pietists saw the preacher’s spiritual condition as a central matter within homiletics,

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66 Edwards Jr., *A History of Preaching*, 71; quoting Spener’s contemporary Gottfried Olearius.

67 Strom, “Pietism and Revival,” 182.

68 Strom, “Pietism and Revival,” 194.

69 In studying scripture, Francke made a distinction between the “kernel” and the “husk.” The husk of scripture was the historical, linguistic study. The kernel was the true inner meaning, and that was the only truly nourishing part of scripture. “It was the ‘literal sense intended by the Holy Spirit himself,’ which was arrived at through biblical exegesis, dogmatic analysis, and practical reading,” (Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 58).

something that differentiated them from their Lutheran peers.<sup>70</sup> To preach well and effectively, “clergy had to be able ‘to preach from the heart’. They had to lift up ‘the miracle of God’ rather than extol their own powers and abilities.”<sup>71</sup> Francke took this a step further, encouraging pastors to not only maintain their own spiritual lives, but serve as an intentional example of vibrant, practical faith for the congregation.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, a convincingly spiritual pastor could add even greater authority to their preaching.<sup>73</sup> Pastors felt that tension and responsibility, with some feeling acute self-doubt: if their sermons seemed to lack efficacy, it must be because of their own spiritual deficiency.<sup>74</sup>

Pietism counterbalances this emphasis on the character of the preacher with an understanding of the power of Christ in the preached word. Sermons were not effective, ultimately, because of human qualities, no matter how spiritually mature. For the Pietists, “The source of power in the preached word is Christ Jesus,” something that is not dependent on the pastor’s character.<sup>75</sup> Everett Wilson, a pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church, describes the Pietists’ viewpoint, saying, “Christ is risen, and present. The preaching does not cause his presence; instead, it defines and declares it. The presence of the risen Christ, not the imagination of the preacher, bridges the gap of history.”<sup>76</sup> Defining and declaring the power of Christ is aided

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70 Strom, “Pietism and Revival,” 193.

71 Stein, *From Head to Heart*, 232; quoting Spener

72 Strom, “Pietism and Revival,” 191. This is, however, a double-edged sword. As Pietist congregations took ahold of this idea, parishioners could question a pastor’s spiritual authority if they doubted his spiritual authenticity (Strom, “Pietism and Revival,” 191). On occasion, conventicles became a breeding ground for this kind of pastoral nitpicking. Some conventicle members might even leave a church if they thought their pastor was not fully committed to their faith (Strom, “Pietism and Revival,” 187).

73 Strom, “Pietism and Revival,” 214.

74 Strom, “Pietism and Revival,” 203-04.

75 Stein, *From Head to Heart*, 239; 139

76 Everett Wilson, “Proclaiming the Story,” in *Glad Hearts*, (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 468.

by a preacher's vibrant and visible close walk with Jesus, but that spirituality does not force Jesus into a place he is not already present. Don Frisk writes, "Through the Holy Spirit the reality of the salvation actualized in Jesus' death and resurrection is made present and effective in the words of the preacher."<sup>77</sup>

At their best, Pietists ensured that their sermons were practical, understandable, and heartfelt. Both in the pulpit and in their pastoral care, they emphasized spiritual awakening over teaching doctrine or morals, seeking to connect emotionally with their congregants.<sup>78</sup> Sermons were full of emotion and often brought about those feelings in the listeners, such that, as one contemporary account recorded, "Many hearers wept, and the floor was moistened as by a shower."<sup>79</sup> This kind of heartfelt engagement was an attempt to spark deep feelings of devotion within their listeners, not simply to get a rise or to be manipulative.

This emotionalism led the effort to bring faith into a person's life. Frisk relates that for the Pietist, "Preaching must be the faithful exposition of the biblical message in such a way as to permit the grace of the Gospel to bear on daily life."<sup>80</sup> Francke encouraged his students to do quality exegesis, but move through it quickly in the sermon to leave more time for application.<sup>81</sup> For Pietists, the goal of the sermon was for God's word to change lives, bringing about conversion, deeper faith, and life-long discipleship.

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77 Donald C. Frisk, "Biblical Moorings," in *Glad Hearts*, ed. James R. Hawkinson (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 465-466.

78 Roger E. Olson and Christian T. Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 119.

79 Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 119.

80 Frisk, "Biblical Moorings," 465-66.

81 Strom, "Pietism and Revival," 192.

Essential to that goal was the Pietists' insistence that sermons be easily understood by lay Christians. From Spener on, Pietists recoiled from overly flowery language that impressed the academy but missed those in the room. Paul Peter Waldenström (1838-1917), a Swedish Pietist, Covenant pastor, and theologian, wrote, "There is a certain eloquence, in my opinion, [with] which... a preacher can speak so that the simplest old lady can understand every word. That is the eloquence I strive for, and which I would counsel all preachers to practice."<sup>82</sup> This targeted communication took skill and intention, and it kept the preacher grounded in his or her context.

Pietists esteemed the sermon highly. Preaching took pride of place in Pietist worship services, and they thought long and hard about what makes a sermon effective. For them, it started with a preacher of good character, deeply committed to his or her spiritual life. Then, exegeting Scripture well to communicate the core of truth, Pietist pastors preached sermons that targeted their lay listeners, connecting with their hearts to inspire life change. That life change was brought about only by the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit active in the preached word.

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82 Paul Peter Waldenström, "Sensitivity to People," in *Glad Hearts*, ed. James R. Hawkinson (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 476. Waldenström goes on to relate a story about the need to speak simply. A preacher spoke on John the Baptist, how he did not belong to the Old Testament nor the New Testament. "Where shall we then put John the Baptist?" the preacher asked his listeners, no doubt an attempted rhetorical question. However, an old farmer gave a blunt reply: "Put him here in my seat because I am leaving." A sermon that may have intrigued a seminarian held no interest for a farmer.

## CHAPTER 4

### PROJECT DESIGN

We move now from theory to practice. In Chapter 1, we saw the American church's struggle to make true disciples of Jesus, and the opportunity for preachers to spark spiritual growth within their congregations. Chapter 2 offered a Biblical and Theological framework for understanding spiritual growth toward maturity. We looked at regeneration and sanctification and were introduced to Historic Pietism's unique theological emphases. Chapter 3 situated this thesis-project within contemporary studies and literature. Homileticians and spiritual formation experts say much on preaching for spiritual growth; preaching remains an essential element in how God grows people toward maturity in Christ. Here in Chapter 4, I will describe the project I undertook to test my hypothesis and show results. Chapter 5 will draw conclusions.

As stated in Chapter 1 my research question and hypothesis are:

**Research question:** In light of the church's difficulty in producing spiritually mature disciples, does preaching with using Pietistic emphases improve the spiritual maturity of the congregants?<sup>1</sup>

**Hypothesis:** Preaching with Pietistic emphases will improve the spiritual maturity of my congregation.

#### **Project Purpose**

The overarching goal of this thesis-project is to experiment with a method to help my congregation grow spiritually. That method is based on Pietist wisdom which I hope will offer insight into our modern struggles with producing mature Christian disciples. Perhaps the Pietist

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 1 for definitions of terms.

homiletic, described in Chapter 2, might encourage other pastors in their pursuit of congregational discipleship.

### **Methodology**

To test this hypothesis, I developed a five-step project. The project moved from (1) confirming that the problem existed within my congregation, to (2) identifying a potential source of help in Historic Pietism. Then, (3) I invited my congregation to take a pretest assessment of spiritual maturity called “the pH Check,” and (4) I preached sermons using Pietistic emphases for an experiment period of six months. I concluded that experiment period with (5) a posttest of spiritual maturity. I will describe those steps in detail now.

#### **Step 1 – Identifying the Problem**

First, I checked to see if the national problem I outlined in Chapter 1 was true for my congregation. My initial assessment came from attendance figures for our various activities that tie into right belief, action, and hope. Later results from the congregational survey, which I will describe below, provided additional information that supported my initial observations. I found diverse results. Activities that support right belief have low engagement. For example, participation in our weekly worship services, youth and children's ministries, and small group ministries have dwindled over the years. Adults in the church are not engaging in community Bible study. This matches the national trends of downward church attendance and engagement, which, along with Bible study, are essential elements in growing right belief.

However, we have recently seen growth in right action. Three new ministries to the working poor, people experiencing homelessness, and food insecurity have launched since 2021 with approximately 30 different individuals participating. The discernment processes we went through when launching those ministries came out of the leadership team’s Bible study. The team

expressed a firm belief that Jesus calls and equips the church to care for the poor, and then took appropriate action grounded in the sure hope that the Holy Spirit was already working there. I was encouraged by that small group process. Giving to the church has also increased since 2020, indicating that our larger congregation is also acting on their faith. Given the concurrent realities of apparent weakness in right belief and growing strength in right action, I felt my church was ready to be challenged to greater spiritual maturity.

## **Step 2 – Identifying a Potential Aid**

The second step of my project design was to write an original Pietist homiletic. I was first introduced to Pietism as I learned the history of my denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Church. The denomination grew out of the Pietist movement in Sweden and America. My interest in the movement grew in 2018 when historian and author Dr. Christopher Gehrz came to my church to teach on his new book *The Pietist Option*, written with Covenant pastor Mark Pattie III. I was impressed by the vibrancy of Pietists' faith and noticed a potential aid for our local struggles to produce true, spiritually mature disciples. As I investigated the movement further, I was struck by how Pietist pastors and lay people were able to spark spiritual growth in a culture saturated with nominal Christians. I felt strongly that Pietism, contextualized for a modern church, would be beneficial.

I wondered also how one might preach Pietistically. Given the potential I saw in Pietism generally to help the church, might their particular way of preaching, if they had one, contribute to the goal of sparking spiritual growth? I was unable to find any writings that systematize how Pietists preached, even though preaching was an integral part of their movement. Theological dictionaries such as *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, and *The New Dictionary of Theology* have articles on the movement, but do not cover preaching specifically. So, I read



Pietist writings on other issues from its originators, as well as secondary sources, to grasp their theological emphases. I then drew from that an overview of Pietistic preaching in its content and manner. I described that homiletic in Chapter 2 and will summarize here.

When a Pietist preaches, certain emphatic themes will rise to the surface, much like their theology. Those emphases are (1) right belief, particularly in conversion, regeneration, and transformation, that comes through a personal experience of and relationship with Jesus (2) right action that centers on practicality and congruence between what we say we believe and how we live, and (3) right hope in God's good designs for the world that spur Christians on to serving their neighbors and the whole world.

This homiletic is not meant to supplant the author's intended meaning in Scripture. I am not suggesting eisegesis. Rather, after rigorous study to discern with the Holy Spirit the intended meaning of a preaching passage, we let the Pietist emphases arise naturally. Often, in practice, I found this coming in the application section of the sermon.

### **Step 3 – Pretesting Spiritual Maturity**

Step three was a pretest of my congregation's spiritual maturity. To accomplish this, I used a standardized church health assessment called "the pH (periodic health) Check." This assessment produced quantitative data that I later compared to the posttest to show a clear indication of growth or lack of growth. Congregants were given two weeks to take the pretest assessment, May 16 to 30, 2023. One hundred and twenty people responded, encouragingly high engagement.

#### *A Description of the pH Check*

I chose the pH Check tool because it comes from my denomination, and this gives three main benefits. The Evangelical Covenant Church was started by Pietists, and I hoped the Pietist

ethos and their definition of spiritual maturity would carry over in their assessment of church health. While it does not overtly state it, the assessment follows the same broad contours. Table 1 shows 16 individual questions that line up with the three areas of right belief, action, and hope. Also, I felt that my congregants would be more inclined toward honesty if they knew the origin of the assessment, a fact we informed the congregation of before they took the assessment. Finally, given our shared denominational context, I found that the questions used language that was mostly familiar to those taking the assessment. Thus, I chose the pH as a clear and trustworthy assessment of the level of spiritual maturity in my congregation.

As we'll see below, the assessment measures a whole congregation's health, not an individual's spiritual maturity. This is a weakness of using the pH Check in this thesis-project. However, we can draw valid conclusions on individuals from this data for two reasons. First, churches are made up of individuals. Any measurement of a group offers insight into its members. Second, being spiritual mature means actively living out professed beliefs. A spiritually mature individual will be active in such a way that others in the congregation will see it. It is not activity for the sake of being seen, of course. As the Pietists so often emphasized, a true disciple will follow up their professed beliefs with aligned actions. By using a tool that measures the overall health of a congregation we will see how individuals in the church perceive other's spiritual maturity, not a self-assessment of a person's own maturity.

The survey itself has 100 questions and utilizes a Likert scale. Respondents are presented a statement, and they decide how well the statement matches their church, from Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, to Strongly Agree. These are assigned a numerical value, from 1 to 5, respectively. I received the numerical responses to each question and averaged them

to show a numerical value between 1 and 5. A high score indicates greater agreement, indicating higher levels of spiritual maturity.

Of those 100 questions, I focused on 16 that closely related to the definition of spiritual maturity I described in Chapter 1.<sup>2</sup> According to the Pietist theology and ethic I am using in this thesis-project, a spiritually mature disciple of Jesus Christ believes rightly, acts rightly, and hopes rightly. A key element of that definition is a willingness to study and submit to Scripture. The 16 questions are not an exhaustive list of all the attributes of right belief, action, or hope, but are representative of the kinds of beliefs, actions, and hopes that a spiritually mature disciple has. Table 1 below shows the 16 questions, which area of spiritual maturity they belong to, and the averaged score.

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<sup>2</sup> More than these 16 questions could apply to these categories of spiritual maturity, but these offer the closest match for a set of usable data. The assessment also includes sections about church leadership and organizational health that were not germane to my topic, hence the low percentage of questions represented here. However, this provided my church's leadership with valuable insights for continued growth in those other areas.

Table 1 - Pretest Questions and Results

<b>Spiritual Maturity Category</b>	<b>pH Check Questions</b>	<b>Pretest May 2023</b>
Right Belief	As a result of attending our church, I am growing in my relationship with God.	3.98
	Our church is committed to the worship of the triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.	4.52
	I regularly hear of people coming to know Jesus Christ through the ministry of our church.	3.18
	As a result of attending our church, I am growing in my understanding of God's love for me.	4.12
Right Action	Our church consistently challenges me to love my neighbor in practical ways.	3.76
	Our church equips me to live out my faith in everyday life	3.98
	As a result of attending our church, I am growing in my ability to discern the Spirit's leading in my life	3.63
	Our church teaches me how to engage in spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading, prayer, and fasting	3.73
	The people in our church are very generous.	3.95
Right Hope	Our church is outward-focused.	3.53
	Our church is active in serving the local community.	4.13
	Our church is passionate about serving the community in which we are located.	3.97
	Our church teaches about the Christian's responsibility to engage in works of compassion, mercy, and justice.	3.68
Biblical Engagement and Understanding	Our church helps me understand the Scriptures.	4.06
	As a result of attending our church, I am growing in my willingness to obey what the Bible teaches.	3.61
	Our church has a growing understanding of God's vision for His church as described in the Bible.	3.43

These results support my initial assessment that our congregation is a mix of spiritual maturity and immaturity, even within the broad categories of belief, action, and hope. There are some bright spots in these pretest results. Respondents generally agree that we are actively serving our community, have practical lives of faith, and worship the Trinity. We can also see an overall ambivalence toward or ignorance of things like God's vision for the church in Scripture and new converts coming to Jesus. Not a dire portrait of our church, but one that could be improved.

#### **Step 4 – Pietistic Preaching Experiment**

Step four was a six-month project of Pietist preaching with the goal of producing spiritual growth in my congregation. From June through November 2023, I preached at least twice a month, following the Revised Common Lectionary. I preached expository sermons using Pietism's homiletical emphases. Although I did not create a sermon series that centered exclusively on the three categories of right belief, action, and hope, I did consciously emphasize those themes in the application sections of my sermons. The project, in retrospect, may have been improved by doing a sermon series that placed the three categories squarely in center stage. I will reflect on this in Chapter 5, but here I will explain my rationale in using the lectionary.

##### *Using the Lectionary*

We used the lection to determine our sermon texts for a variety of reasons. I serve as the Associate Pastor in my church. After this project was conceived but before it started, our Senior Pastor announced he was leaving our church after 15 years of ministry. I worked on a team with staff and lay leaders to discern what sermons and Scripture would best serve our congregation during the time of transition. Given the heightened anxiety and fear in the church following the Senior Pastor's exit, the worship leadership team felt that the lectionary's journey through the

book of Genesis was the best choice for June through August. Hospitality is a significant theme throughout Genesis. We wanted to help our congregation grow in their ability to show hospitality to their neighbors and each other. It also proved to be fertile ground for discussing the need to keep what we say and what we do in congruence.

Starting in September, a Transitional Pastor came who decided which texts and sermon series to use. The Transitional Pastor decided we'd move away from Genesis into Acts, preaching a series on the essential elements of a healthy church from Acts 2:42. I, as the Associate Pastor, did not have full latitude to preach whatever I wanted. The Transitional Pastor and I worked together to balance my thesis-project goal and the needs of our congregation in pastoral transition. While everyone was as accommodating as possible, no one, including me, wished to put the needs of this thesis-project above the needs of the congregation.

The goal of my thesis-project was to grow disciples toward spiritual maturity, using Pietism as a guide. The goal was not to grow Pietists, but to grow these particular people into the image of Christ as characterized in Pietistic thinking. Therefore, I did not design a sermon series on the core tenets of Pietism. Instead, I trusted 2 Timothy 3:16, that all Scripture is useful for training in righteousness. By using lectionary texts, I hoped to show that Pietism can be an aid toward spiritual growth in a wide variety of contexts and does not need a targeted sermon series to be effective.

Finally, I decided to use lectionary texts for the preaching experiment in an attempt to isolate Pietism as the key factor in sparking spiritual growth. I was concerned that if I preached a sermon series on a specific area or overview of spiritual maturity, any results would simply indicate that preaching about spiritual maturity brings about growth. I wanted to see if those

*particularly* Pietist theological emphases had any effect. So, I used Pietism as an aid and a guide in the homiletical task of preaching to a particular congregation with pronounced needs.

### *Using Pietism's Theological Themes in the Sermon*

Throughout the preaching project, I preached expository sermons. I sought to bring out of the sermon texts the divine and human authors' intended meaning, which I wrote into a single statement called the "textual big idea." From there, I crafted a homiletical big idea, or a single, driving statement for the sermon. Then I engaged my Pietist homiletic. Pietism's theological themes did not supplant the Biblical author's intended meaning in my sermon preparation. I looked to see which Pietistic theme most closely resonated with the textual and homiletical big ideas. I emphasized that theme in the sermon, and it often shaped the application and sometimes the whole big idea for the sermon. Once I identified a connection point, I wrote a Pietistic big idea and a statement of how that sermon would emphasize that element of Pietism. The homiletical big idea is the main thrust of the sermon arising from exegetical work. The Pietistic big idea is the homiletical big idea with a Pietistic emphasis.

These sermons were designed to grow my congregation in spiritual maturity, right belief, action, and hope. By keeping those three marks of spiritual maturity in view, the sermons consistently showed the congregation how they might grow. The sermons offered concrete, practical, and Biblical encouragement to grow. For example, Table 1 shows a slight disparity between the questions related to Biblical engagement. My congregation felt that the church helps them understand the Scripture but are less inclined to say we help them obey it. Submitting to Scripture is an essential element of spiritual maturity. Knowing this, I preached sermons designed to highlight the need to obey (such as "The Servant's Tale"), rely on God's self-revelation ("Sacred Space"), and several sermons on the need for action (such as "A Wedding

and a Feast”). The sermons did not move toward spiritual maturity by simply telling people they ought to believe rightly, but rather by encouraging small movements of faith that build up toward right belief, action, and hope. Table 2 below shows the sermons I preached, and lays out the text, homiletical big idea, and Pietistic big idea for each.

For example, I preached a sermon on June 11 titled “Family Plans.” It was based on Genesis 12:1-9, the story of God calling Abram out of his home to the Promised land. Trusting God is a fundamental theme in this passage. Abram is called to put his trust into action by packing up everything he owns, leaving his home, and going to an unknown place that God was going to show him. With our church in a pastoral transition, many in my congregation felt anxiety and fear for the future. I crafted this homiletical idea: “We can trust God and build on that hope.” The Pietistic theme of Hope connects well with this text and lends itself to this sermon. Hope calls the congregation to trust in God’s good plan, even when we don’t know what’s coming. With that emphasis in mind, I wrote a Pietistic big idea of “Hope: We trust God enough to build on God's promises.” In this instance, the two big ideas are similar, something that happened regularly throughout the preaching project, as you can see in Table 2. The Pietistic big idea was helpful to me as I wrote the sermon. It served as a reminder of and a guide to the emphatic points I wanted to hit.

I used this approach in all the sermons I preached in the summer and fall, my experiment period. As we followed the lectionary through Genesis, different passages lent themselves to different Pietistic themes. Although I never presented the congregation with an overview of the homiletic or a description of the themes I was highlighting (I will return to this thought in the next chapter), the sermons and Pietistic emphases felt organic. I will offer more reflections on the six months of preaching in Chapter 5.



Table 2 - Sermons and Pietistic Emphases

Sermon Title	Sermon text	Date Preached	Homiletical Big Idea	Maturity Emphasis	Pietistic Big Idea
God-Sized Hospitality	Genesis 1:1 -Genesis 2:3	June 4	God created reality because of his Hospitality. So do we.	Action	<b>A practical faith.</b> We can put this into action today by being mindful of how we create realities
Family Plans	Genesis 12:1-9	June 11	We can trust God and build on that hope	Hope	<b>Hope.</b> We trust God enough to build on God's promises
From Laughter to Laughter	Genesis 18:1-15 (21:1-7)	June 18	God creates a space where our disappointments become our joys	Hope	<b>Hope.</b> A hope marked by joy - not idealistic, pie in the sky, but grounded in the reality of our pain and the just-as-real reality of God's sure promise
The Servant's Tale	Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67	July 9	Prepare. Pray. Wait. God will do what God will do.	Action	<b>Congruence of belief and action.</b> Do we actually trust God with our actions? Do we actually wait for God to act?
God and our Messes	Genesis 29:15-28	July 30	God works in our messes to make us better.	Belief	<b>Regeneration.</b> God works to make us more like Christ.
Leaving a Mark	Genesis 32:22-31	August 6	Encountering God brings struggle, blessing, and it leaves a mark on our destiny	Belief	<b>Individual experience.</b> You need an individual encounter with God.
Carving Out Space	Genesis 45:1-15	August 20	God carved out space for us to flourish, so we do the same, through Jesus	Belief	<b>Experiencing God in a Personal Relationship with Jesus</b> meets our own needs and enables us to help others flourish.
Israel in Chains	Exodus 1:8 - Exodus 2:10	August 27	Knowing Jesus prepares us to handle chaos	Belief	<b>Personal Relationship with Jesus</b> gives us solid ground in chaotic times

Sermon Title	Sermon text	Date Preached	Homiletical Big Idea	Maturity Emphasis	Pietistic Big Idea
Sacred Space	Exodus 3:1-15	September 3	God made Sacred Space and then calls and enables us to do the	Action	<b>A practical faith</b> that is reliant on God's self-revelation
The Breaking of Bread	Acts 2:42	September 24	Jesus takes our ordinary and makes it more	Action	<b>Transformation and Doing</b> - We have our own experience of Jesus and then go and do like him.
A Wedding and a Feast	Matthew 22:1-14	October 22	Hear the call. Accept the invitation. Then do!	Belief	<b>Rebirth.</b> New life is born in us, and we have to live that out.
What is Caesar's? What is God's?	Matthew 22:15-22	October 29	Give what little is due to the Empire but give to God all that is God's.	Belief	<b>Conversion</b> to deeper discipleship
Wisdom Vs. Foolishness	Matthew 25:1-13	November 19	The Kingdom of God is coming. So be ready.	Hope	<b>Hope</b> for the future compels us to prepare right now
Sheep vs. Goats	Matthew 25:31-46	November 26	Do compassionate things because Jesus is making you into a compassionate person	Action	<b>Congruence</b> - our actions flow out of our relationship with Jesus.

## **Step 5 – Posttest using the pH Check**

In the fifth and final step of the project, the congregation took the same pH Check assessment. It was open for participation from December 3 to 17, 2023. In this posttest, 72 members participated. Table 3 below shows the results and a comparison between the pretest and posttest.

The “Difference” column shows a modest positive change in spiritual maturity, in all but one statement. The lone negative change was for the statement, “Our church is committed to the worship of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Every other statement showed an increase. The largest change came in the questions related to the Right Hope that spurs service and mission to improve the lives of our neighbors and the world. Another notable increase came in response to the statement, “As a result of attending our church, I am growing in my willingness to obey what the Bible teaches.” Those statements related to Right Action and Right Belief saw modest increases.

Table 3 - Posttest Results and Comparison

<b>Spiritual Maturity Category</b>	<b>pH Check Questions</b>	<b>Pretest May 2023</b>	<b>Posttest December 2023</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Right Belief	As a result of attending our church, I am growing in my relationship with God.	3.98	4.24	0.25
	Our church is committed to the worship of the triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.	4.52	4.39	-0.13
	I regularly hear of people coming to know Jesus Christ through the ministry of our church.	3.18	3.29	0.11
	As a result of attending our church, I am growing in my understanding of God’s love for me.	4.12	4.29	0.18
Right Action	Our church consistently challenges me to love my neighbor in practical ways.	3.76	4.08	0.33
	Our church equips me to live out my faith in everyday life	3.98	4.08	0.1
	As a result of attending our church, I am growing in my ability to discern the Spirit’s leading in my life	3.63	3.86	0.23
	Our church teaches me how to engage in spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading, prayer, and fasting	3.73	3.83	0.1
	The people in our church are very generous.	3.95	4.26	0.31
Right Hope	Our church is outward-focused.	3.53	3.94	0.41
	Our church is active in serving the local community.	4.13	4.54	0.41
	Our church is passionate about serving the community in which we are located.	3.97	4.31	0.34
	Our church teaches about the Christian’s responsibility to engage in works of compassion, mercy, and justice.	3.68	3.88	0.19
Biblical Engagement and Understanding	Our church helps me understand the Scriptures.	4.06	4.15	0.09
	As a result of attending our church, I am growing in my willingness to obey what the Bible teaches.	3.61	3.99	0.38
	Our church has a growing understanding of God’s vision for His church as described in the Bible.	3.43	3.61	0.18

## **Conclusion**

The results of this thesis-project suggest that preaching using a Pietist homiletic does seem to be an element that can spark spiritual growth, confirming my hypothesis. The change is small, but notable. We will draw more in-depth conclusions in Chapter 5. I will also describe two significant limitations within the project design. Finally, I will flesh out the implications of this positive result.

## CHAPTER 5

### OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION

In this thesis-project, I hypothesized that preaching to a Christian congregation in America using the theological emphases of Pietism would spark spiritual growth in my church. The Church in America does not produce spiritually mature disciples as it ought, yet there remains a remnant core of disciples who might be ready for spiritual growth. Preachers are uniquely situated to address this issue. I hoped Historic Pietism would offer modern pastors aid and guidance as we seek to join the Holy Spirit in producing spiritually mature disciples.

The Pietist understanding of the true Christian disciple shaped my preaching project. Pietists suggest that to be spiritually mature, one must have Biblically formed right belief, right action, and right hope. One must bring his or her actions into congruence with beliefs in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and let the hope of Christ direct those actions. I preached for six months emphasizing those three markers of spiritual maturity as we followed the lectionary through Genesis and Acts. Using a pretest/posttest method with a tool called the pH Check, I assessed my congregation's spiritual maturity to see if changes occurred. Those results, located in Table 3 in Chapter 4, indicate that the congregation did grow spiritually, confirming my hypothesis. In this chapter, I will analyze the results, describe major findings, and discuss some limitations of my study.

#### **Analysis of Results**

The results from the 16 statements I isolated out of the pH Check assessment show a slight but noticeable improvement in spiritual maturity. Respondents were presented statements regarding activities or qualities of our church and then asked to rate how representative those statements are. Responses were made with a score from one to five, from strongly disagree to

strongly agree. I received and averaged the raw numerical data for all responses to those 16 statements. As I discussed in Chapter 4, the pH Check assesses overall church health, not individual spiritual maturity. I will return to this issue when I discuss the Limitations of the Study below. Here I will describe how I am drawing inferences about spiritual maturity from the results of this assessment, specifically in the statements that changed the most from the pretest to the posttest.

Table 3 in Chapter 4 (on page 123 above) shows all the statements, their pretest, and posttest average scores, as well as the related area of spiritual maturity. In Chapter 1, I defined the spiritual mature Christian disciple as one who believes rightly, acts rightly, and hopes rightly, as defined by Scripture. Each of those three areas (belief, action, and hope) are connected to several statements from the pH Check. Biblical engagement and understanding are crucial elements of spiritual maturity, and so it also has a section on the table. Allowing Scripture to define what is *right* belief, action, and hope is an essential element of spiritual maturity, and so I identified three statements that relate to that area of maturity. As you can see in the “Difference” column in Table 3, 16 out of 17 statements saw an increase in average agreement, across all areas of spiritual maturity.

Three of the five statements that saw the largest increase came from the Right Hope area. Pietists understood hope to be grounded in a realized eschatology, as described in Chapter 2. In the end God will set all things right, including lifting up the poor, the oppressed, and the needy. God is, in fact, doing these things right now as God’s Kingdom advances in the world. Since we know that this bright future begins in the present, we ought to join the Holy Spirit in doing that work now. Right Hope leads us to work to improve the lives of our neighbors close by and

around the world. Of the four statements in the pH Check related to this area of spiritual maturity, two increased significantly.

- “Our church is outward-focused,” increased by 0.41 points to 3.94.
- “Our church is active in serving the local community,” increased by 0.41 points, to 4.51.

I am inferring spiritual maturity from these statements on church-wide action because the congregation is made up of individuals. More agreement with those statements indicates more people are serving the community through our outward focus, an essential aspect of a Pietist understanding of hope. These represented the largest change in the entire survey from pretest to posttest.

Two statements concerning Biblical obedience and Right Action also increased significantly.

- “As a result of attending our church, I am growing in my willingness to obey what the Bible teaches,” grew by 0.38 points to 3.99.
- “Our church consistently challenges me to love my neighbor in practical ways,” grew by 0.33 to 4.08.

I am inferring from these results that my sermons were a significant change-agent that produced the growth in obedience. Using the lectionary was part of my attempt to limit the number of variables that might affect spiritual growth to isolate Pietistic emphases. We did not start any other programs related to Biblical engagement and understanding. Thus, the growth in agreement with that statement suggests the sermons were the effective piece.

### **Major Findings**

From these results, we can infer that preaching with Pietistic emphases does contribute to congregants’ growing in spiritual maturity. Over the course of the six-month experiment period, I preached fourteen sermons with Pietistic emphases. Six sermons had an emphasis on right belief, five sermons emphasized right action, and three emphasized right hope. According to the results,



spiritual maturity in the area of hope increased most significantly, followed by action, and then belief. These positive results suggest several major findings. First, preaching influences spiritual growth, particularly when preaching with the goal in mind. Second, lectionary preaching is effective in promoting spiritual growth. Third, it is helpful for the preacher to know the level of spiritual maturity in his or her congregation. Finally, Pietism is a helpful aid as we face the problems in the modern American church.

First, preaching does influence spiritual growth. The impact measured over this six-month preaching project was small, but noticeable. This supports Linda Saad's study cited in Chapter 1, which concluded that three out of every four people who continue to attend worship services do so because of Biblical preaching that connects the texts to their lives.<sup>1</sup> Preachers are well positioned to effectively spark spiritual growth, something that is helped by preaching with that goal in mind. I found it immensely helpful to have a definition of spiritual maturity as the target I was aiming at, the goal of my planning. Pietism's three areas of maturity offered me a way to target my preaching and keep it fresh, even in a long sermon series through Genesis. Emphasizing those areas of spiritual maturity gave each week a different flavor and a different outcome, yet they were also unified by a consistent, well-defined goal. Planning a year's preaching, or even a season's, would be enhanced by knowing the state of the congregation and having a well-defined idea of spiritual maturity. Scott Gibson agrees. He writes in *Preaching with a Plan*, "Our goal is Christlikeness, and we know that believers in Jesus Christ will mature in their faith through faithful sermon planning and the preaching of God's Word."<sup>2</sup> In working

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1 Lydia Saad, "Sermon Content is What Appeals Most to Churchgoers," 2017, accessed August 31, 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/208529/sermon-content-appeals-churchgoers.aspx>.

2 Scott M. Gibson, *Preaching With a Plan: Sermon Strategies for Growing Mature Believers* (Baker Books, 2012), 11.

toward the goal of Christlike, spiritually mature disciples, Gibson equates preaching the sermon with planning the sermon. Targeted planning will help spiritually grow disciples.

Second, I found lectionary preaching to effectively promote spiritual growth. Following the lectionary leads a preacher through a wide swath of Scripture, which is beneficial for spiritual growth on its own. Christian disciples need to know all the Bible and the lectionary can help avoid a preacher's unconscious biases toward one part of Scripture over another. There may be times, however, when a preacher needs to address a spiritual issue through a sermon series. Given the goal of preaching for spiritual growth, a mix of lectionary preaching and more targeted sermon series might be the best approach.

Third, preaching is most effective when the preacher knows the spiritual maturity of his or her congregation. Knowing where a congregation is weakest in spiritual maturity allows the preacher to target sermons. To this end, a tool like the pH Check is very useful and became more so after the posttest results. Directly comparing areas of spiritual health across a period of time offered me as the preacher and our church's lay leadership valuable information on how to continue to grow the congregation through preaching and other programming. The pH Check is one of many assessments that offer this kind of insight. Choosing one and using it multiple times of the course of several years has the potential to significantly increase the overall spiritual health of a congregation.

Finally, I found Pietism to be a helpful aid in addressing the challenges of ministry in the modern American church. As I stated in Chapter 1, the church in America has struggled to produce spiritual mature disciples. We see this as American Christians change the definition of what it means to be a Christian, in three specific categories: dropping church attendance, shifting

practices of faith, and the rise of self-described “spiritual but not religious” individuals, a group often called “the Nones.” Pietism offers a unique response to each of these challenges.

As overall attendance numbers have dropped precipitously over the last few decades, Pietism offers a way for people who left to reengage the church. The Pietist movement found its origin in a weariness with and skepticism of the over-institutionalized German Lutheran state church. Its founders understood that too much dogma and too much structure can calcify a congregation and starve a person’s faith. We see this same weariness and skepticism today, as people leave the familiar structures of church for individual expressions of spirituality. Pietism addresses this skepticism and offers instead the conventicle model. By emphasizing a small community of committed believers, Pietism shows that supportive relational connections could draw people back. Conventicles center Scripture, paving the way for the Holy Spirit to shape spiritually mature disciples who are wary of large church structures.

American Christians are leaving their churches and are also changing the definition of what it means to practice the faith. As we saw in Chapter 1, this means less trust in the authority of Scripture, less prayer, and less intentional discipleship. Pietism shows that an active life of faith is one that thrives. By holding a high moral bar for true Christians, Pietists showed that the life of faith is one full of joy and hope regardless of circumstances. This good life comes from submission to Biblical authority, an active internal prayer life, and a congruent exterior life committed to true discipleship. Once a person has engaged in a conventicle, these aspects of the good life that God has promised (John 10:10), come to the fore.

“Spiritual but not religious” is rapidly becoming America’s primary religious category. As of January 2024, the so-called “Nones,” those who identify with no particular religious group,

are the largest single religious group in the country.<sup>3</sup> Pietism offers a compelling response to this new reality. By highlighting core orthodoxy and allowing for variation on secondary theological issues, Pietism can create a welcoming, hospitable space where people can engage and then be challenged to grow. Pietism's focus on a personal relationship with Jesus, a felt experience expressed in a changed life, can be inviting to those who resonate with spirituality yet want nothing to do with an over-institutionalized religion.

As I worked to incorporate Pietist theological emphases into my regular homiletic, I found it beneficial for my preaching and my own spirituality. Pietistic preaching is rigorous, simple, and heartfelt, producing preachers who are humbly engaged with the Spirit in their own spiritual lives. I found the combination of humility, allowing the Spirit to work on me through the text first, and rigorous study compelling. It was a wonderful regular reminder that preaching preparation can be a spiritual practice, and it is always good to engage the preacher's own heart in the message. Focusing on crafting simple messages that were not simplistic was a good challenge, and I felt it strengthen my sermon writing. Delivering the message in an appropriately emotional, heartfelt way helped me connect with my congregation and improved my sermon delivery. This Pietist homiletic, which seems to spark spiritual growth, is a valuable tool for my future preaching and one that could be beneficially adapted to any preaching context. I recommend Pietism for other pastors' personal, homiletical, and theological study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While we have results from this project that indicate growth in spiritual maturity, the study itself was not all it could have been. I described my rationale for the preaching project in

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<sup>3</sup> Jason DeRose, "Religious 'Nones' Are Now the Largest Single Group in the U.S.," accessed January 24, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/24/1226371734/religious-nones-are-now-the-largest-single-group-in-the-u-s>.

Chapter 4 and there indicated that aspects of the experiment were hampered by my design. If I were to redo this study, there are two areas I would change. First, the pH Check congregational health assessment was not well suited for this preaching project. Second, the lack of a targeted sermon series may have hindered potential growth.

First, the pH Check congregational health assessment was not the tool best suited for this thesis-project. It offered meaningful and actionable insights into the overall health of our church but is not designed to measure the spiritual maturity of individuals. Given that I was testing to measure individuals' spiritual maturity based on a particular definition, it would have been better to use a tool designed to measure that specific definition. In retrospect, I could have written a survey myself to assess my preaching's effect on the congregation's right belief, action, and hope, and Biblical engagement. The results from the pH Check are valid in assessing a congregation's health, and by extension I have argued that the pH Check thus reveals individuals' maturity, yet a tool better suited to the task would have improved my thesis-project.

A second limitation came in my design of the preaching project. Using the lectionary to determine my preaching texts may have hindered spiritual growth. My sermons and evaluations intended to isolate Pietism's emphases as the only independent variable for the experiment. However, it may have been better to design a sermon series that overtly expressed, explained, and applied Pietism's definition of spiritual maturity to create the same isolating effect. Congregational spiritual growth may have been increased by stating outright how Pietism defined spiritual maturity and how I would be incorporating that into my preaching. Giving people direct information on the necessity of spiritual growth and the specific areas in which we all must grow would likely increase the spiritual maturity of those willing to listen. Were I able

to do this experiment again, addressing these two areas may well increase spiritual growth even further.

There is a final limiting factor worth mentioning. It is difficult to know for sure that preaching was the cause of spiritual growth. I attempted, as I said, to isolate Pietist theological emphases as the sole independent variable. In the end, however, it is not possible to isolate a person from spiritual influences. My church was undergoing a significant pastoral transition, which certainly could have impacted the congregation's spiritual growth potential, positively or negatively. Individuals in the congregation may have started Bible reading plans, joined small groups, or volunteered at mission efforts, all of which also contributes to spiritual growth. I have shown the connections between preaching and the spiritual growth results from the pH Check, and I believe my conclusions are valid. However, within all the complex elements that the Holy Spirit uses to grow disciples, isolating and testing a single factor remains a distinct challenge.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

There is ample room for further research on Pietism and preaching. Francke was a prolific preacher and many of his sermons exist in written form, though most are in German. Access to this body of work in English and other languages would be a significant help for further studies into Pietist preaching. Another area of potential research is in Pietism as it spread through Scandinavia, England, and the United States. A longitudinal study of Pietist preaching through those decades of expansion could show how the preaching changed and adapted to new contexts with new goals. Finally, Spener wrote many letters throughout his ministry. He would regularly receive questions from lay Christians on how to live faithfully in their circumstances. As he was relentlessly practical, Spener would answer as many letters as possible. Studying those letters would reveal how he contextualized his theology within people's everyday lives.

I am encouraged and excited by the potential help Pietism can offer churches today. Pietists brought spiritual vibrancy into a time of religious nominalism and malaise. Christians that are deeply, personally committed to Jesus Christ and to Scripture, who hold fast to primary orthodoxy with room for diversity on secondary issues, whose lives are congruent with their words, and who passionately hope for the future of humanity is a compelling vision. Preaching stands in a place of honor in Christian history and in our American church today. Perhaps Pietist preaching will help us as we make a path forward for God's glory and our neighbor's good.

## APPENDIX A

### ORIGINS OF HISTORIC PIETISM

Philip Jakob Spener faced a significant challenge in his congregation in Frankfurt, Germany around 1670. There were people in the pews, but many slept through the service. They were members of the Lutheran church, even attended regularly, but their faith had no spark, and their souls no fire. Considering the state of the Lutheran Church at large, Spener was probably not surprised. While he would not have considered himself an innovator, he knew something had to be done, and so he did something: he gathered lay people who wanted to study the Bible.

Twice a week, they would gather in his home to recap the previous Sunday's sermon, to read Scripture together, to ask questions, and to pray together. It was a fresh and new way for those non-clergy to engage their faith. Suddenly, Christianity became something vibrant and life changing. Spener called his gathering a *collegia pietatis*, and they later became known as "conventicles." More groups grew in his congregation, and within a few years, conventicles were all over Europe. Clergy who felt threatened by an empowered laity looked on these conventicles with scorn, using the pejorative "gatherings of the pious." Thus, "Pietism" was born.<sup>1</sup>

Pietism was a movement begun by Philip Spener when he published *Pia Desideria* in 1675. At first, the name "Pietist" didn't sit well with Spener; he found it too sectarian and that was not his goal. Eventually, he accepted the epithet because it accurately described the movement's focus: living a pious life where doctrine and action are congruent for both the individual and the church.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Bruce Leon Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Thomas Nelson Incorporated, 1995), 326.

2 Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys: The Christian Ethic of Pietism* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 10.



## Defining Pietism

Defining Pietism can be a difficult task. While it was a historical movement that took shape in a particular context, it also lacked any formal structure or organizing principles. Pietism never formed into a denomination and never adopted a creed or catechism; these factors make it difficult to nail down. By way of definition, however, Alec Ryrie offers this starting point: Pietism was “a movement originating in seventeenth-century Lutheranism that stressed inner union with Christ and spiritual renewal, both by individual believers and by mutually encouraging groups of laypeople.”<sup>3</sup> Most historians date the beginning of Pietism to 1675, when Spener published *Pia Desideria* while serving as a pastor in the Lutheran Church of Germany.

Jonathan Strom rightly emphasizes that Pietism was a *renewal* movement, one that he calls “the most important renewal movement within German Protestantism after the Reformation.”<sup>4</sup> Reacting to the “ossification of the Reformation,” Spener’s goal was to restore the spirit of the Reformation and to revitalize Christians from their nominalism.<sup>5</sup> As Spener took great pains to insist, Pietism was nothing new; he was not inventing anything. It was a rekindling passionate commitment to God that had been Protestantism’s core value since Luther.<sup>6</sup> Pietism had a remarkably simple structure: individual believers supported one another in lives of holiness, with or without clergy there to guide, which drew the ire of many in the established Lutheran church. The culture around Germany in the mid-17th Century was quite opposed to this push toward a flatter authority structure.

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3 Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Faith That Made the Modern World* (New York: Viking Press, 2017), loc. 8316. Kindle.

4 Jonathan Strom, *German Pietism and the Problem of Conversion* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), loc. 112. Kindle.

5 Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 326.

6 Ryrie, *Protestants*, loc. 2983. Kindle.

## Historical Setting

Pietism was born in the wake of the Thirty Years War, a conflict that saw Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism vying for supremacy through brutal military campaigns, centered in modern day Germany.<sup>7</sup> At the close of the war in 1648, a rigid class distinction emerged that held sway in both Church and State.<sup>8</sup> Power centralized in the hands of feudal lords, who, though they were often only nominal members of a church, loved to meddle in its affairs. At the time, membership in the church was by birth or geography; if you were born in a Lutheran town, you were automatically a member of the Lutheran church.

The disputes of the War continued to play out in the church. According to Tappert, “Protestant sentiment against Roman Catholicism was exceeded only by controversy within Protestantism.”<sup>9</sup> Lutherans and Calvinists had nothing but distain for each other, and much of Seminary education was learning rote theologies to defeat the other side. Pastors would devote as much as an entire year’s worth of sermons to content aimed at controversies with other Christians of a different confession. They would use Latin and Greek but leave it untranslated, which compounded the people’s sense that the sermon, and indeed the whole church, was not for them.<sup>10</sup>

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7 The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. “Thirty Years’ War.” Encyclopedia Britannica (2021): <https://www.britannica.com/event/Thirty-Years-War>.

8 C. John Weborg. “Pietism: ‘the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany’.” The Covenant Quarterly 43, no. 1 (1985): <https://gordonconwell.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000943767&site=ehost-live&scope=site> <http://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/index;> 5.

9 Theodore G. Tappert, “Introduction: The Times, the Man, the Book,” in *Pia Desideria* (Fortress Press, 1996), 5.

10 John Weborg, “Pietism: ‘the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany’”: 9.

## Pietism's Growth

The post-war times were dehumanizing, and the church needed to recover its heart and become a place where individuals could do the same. This is the context into which Philipp Spener started parish ministry.

### Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705)

While the Thirty Year's War still raged, Philipp Jakob Spener was born January 13, 1635, in Roppoltstein, near Strasbourg, Germany.<sup>11</sup> He was an avid reader, but was significantly formed by Johann Arndt (1555-1621), specifically *True Christianity*, a collection of Arndt's sermons made into a devotional book. Arndt was adamant that orthodox doctrine was not enough for a truly Christian life, and he advocated for a mysticism drawn mostly from the late Middle Ages.

Spener was pastoring in Frankfurt in 1670 when he began an ancient but novel practice of an "apostolic kind of church meeting," the *collegia pietatis* mentioned above.<sup>12</sup> This started a lifetime of empowering lay ministry. Spener was willing and excited to teach women in his conventicles, which then expanded to include all sorts of marginalized populations, such as children and those not wealthy enough to be included in the feudal elite of the day.<sup>13</sup>

### *Pia Desideria*

In 1675, Spener was asked to write a preface to a new edition of Arndt's *True Christianity*. After seeing first-hand what Christian life was like among the common people of Germany as well as the state of the larger Lutheran church, Spener took the opportunity to set out

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11 Tappert, "Introduction," 8.

12 Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), 90.

13 Jane Chao Pomeroy and Cathy Norman Peterson. "We Are Pietists With Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom." (2021): <https://covchurch.org/2021/11/16/we-are-pietists-with-michelle-clifton-soderstrom/>.

a plan for revitalization. He saw some dramatic “defects” among the clergy and laity of the church, claiming that too many were simply not living truly Christian lives. His idea was pragmatic and simple: a stricter and warm Christian life.<sup>14</sup> The introduction caused quite the stir and was published as a stand-alone volume that same year under the title *Pia Desideria*.

The book was different from others of the time. It carried more bite and was more offensive to the establishment because Spener went beyond simply bemoaning all that was wrong. He offered practical solutions.<sup>15</sup> Those solutions came as 6 suggestions for the renewal and reform of the church, which John Weborg summarizes:

1) A more extensive use of Scripture than is provided in the pericope texts; 2) the establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood; 3) since Christianity consists of practice, it is not enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith; 4) caution must be used in the conduct of religious controversies; 5) schools, especially for the clergy, should be workshops of the Holy Spirit; 6) theological education should include practice in ministerial work at all times in the hearers to the greatest possible degree.<sup>16</sup>

As the *Pia*, as it is sometimes called, gained more traction, so did conventicles. Spener corresponded with many small groups all over Europe, as participants wrote with questions regarding the particulars of the pietistic life. Through this, Spener became more convinced that renewal would come only by tapping into the remnant of true Christians in every congregation, so they might spread like yeast through dough.<sup>17</sup>

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14 Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 327.

15 Ryrie, *Protestants*, loc. 2882. Kindle.

16 C. John Weborg. “Pietism: A Question of Meaning and Vocation.” *The Covenant Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1983): <https://gordonconwell.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000932873&site=ehost-live&scope=site http://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/index>: 62. The sixth’s proposal in Spener’s words is “that sermons be so prepared by all that their purpose (faith and its fruits) may be achieved in the hearers to the greatest possible degree.” Weborg here is expanding on the themes about which Spener writes through the chapter to include all theological education, yet Spener’s emphasis on preaching is notable.

17 Tappert, “Introduction,” 19.

Conventicles were not the only innovation attracting people to Pietism. Spener's particular theology "offered a solution to one of the age's perennial political headaches: endless intra-Protestant quarrels."<sup>18</sup> By insisting that doctrine was not the most important aspect of Christianity, Spener caught the attention of Germany's rising power: Brandenburg-Prussia and the ruling Hohenzollern dynasty, Calvinists whose subjects were mostly Lutheran. Summed up by Ryrie, "A religious movement that could unite different Protestants in a common cause was very attractive."<sup>19</sup>

### Further Growth

Two of Spener's protégés helped to bring Pietism to the wider world: August Hermann Francke (1663-1727) and Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760).

Francke was the "organizational genius of Pietism," and "one of history's great religious entrepreneurs."<sup>20</sup> He took the message of Pietism to the University of Halle and turned it into the "engine room of a Pietist revolution."<sup>21</sup> Embracing experimentation, Francke tried new ways to minister to his neighbors. Halle produced medicines, opened schools, built the largest orphanage in Europe, and poured out Pietist tracts in almost every language spoken in Europe, among a variety of other enterprises. Not only concerned with the plight of people at home, Francke launched the first-ever organized Lutheran overseas mission in 1706, sending two German missionaries to the Danish colony of Tranquebar, in southern India.<sup>22</sup>

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18 Ryrie, *Protestants*, loc. 2896. Kindle.

19 Ryrie, *Protestants*, loc. 2896. Kindle.

20 C. John Weborg, "Pietism: 'the Fire of God Which Flames in the Heart of Germany'": 16. Ryrie, *Protestants*, loc. 2901. Kindle.

21 Ryrie, *Protestants*, loc. 2901. Kindle.

22 Ryrie, *Protestants*, loc. 2906. Kindle.

Zinzendorf had a similarly experimental spirit. He was “an ardent and emotional man who believed that the mark of true Christianity is a simple, childlike faith in the blood of Jesus.”<sup>23</sup> His emotional and sentimental faith led him to write many hymns and fed into his strong missionary tendency. Zinzendorf purchased an estate in Dresden and then opened it up to refugees from Moravia in 1722. His Moravian community became one of the first large-scale Protestant missionary forces, all while maintaining Herrnhut, his estate, as a kind of “social monasticism.”<sup>24</sup> Their goal was a completely separate Christian town, dedicated to spiritual growth and right living. More radical Pietists took this idea and built it into separatism, with an impact that can be felt in modern Fundamentalism.

Pietism continued to grow and spread, taking on more contextual forms everywhere it went. Without the formation of a central organizing body to define what Pietism was and what it was not, the movement became diffuse and eventually fell off the historical record. Before it did, though, the movement impacted Protestantism and the world. Notably, John Wesley was converted by Pietists and Pietism led directly to American Revivalism.<sup>25</sup> Pietism left an enduring mark on Protestant churches. Many who identify as Evangelical, who are mission-oriented, and who place strong authority in the Bible descend from Pietism, whether they know it or not.<sup>26</sup> The name may have fallen out of modern consciousness, but Pietism’s influence can still be felt today.

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23 Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 328.

24 Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 328ff.

25 Ryrie, *Protestants*, 172.

26 Davie, Martin et al., *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic* (InterVarsity Press, 2016), 1419.

## APPENDIX B

### SUMMARY OF A PIETIST HOMILETIC

“Quite simply remember you would 1. believe, 2. do, 3. hope what is taught, commanded, and promised in Scripture.” August Hermann Francke

Pietists take their theology seriously, but always move their thinking into practice. This is why Pietists spent so much time in the pulpit. The sermon is where a pastor can bring right thinking and right practice into harmony, a hallmark of Pietism.

Pietist preaching can be done using any text in any context. It is not a set of doctrines to be preached by rote, but a set of emphases to draw out. It has as much to do with *how* we preach as *what* we preach.

**Start with your own heart.** If we don't feel an experience of the Word ourselves, we won't be able to spark that experience in others. Let the Holy Spirit work in you through the text first.

To preach Pietistic sermons, here is a manner of preaching and content to emphasize.

#### **Manner - How do Pietists preach?**

**Be rigorous.** Preaching is a serious task and deserves your full attention. Do serious exegesis so that you can be sure you are communicating the simple message of scripture in clear, accessible, and understandable ways.

**Be simple.** Pietists simplify, especially when it comes to essential doctrine. Let major theologies be major, and let secondary issues be so.

**Be heartfelt.** Aim your preaching at the heart, to help your hearers feel the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. God interacts with us at a heart-level, transforms from the inside out. Preach to the inner person, leveraging your pastoral relationships.

### **Content Emphases - What do Pietists preach?**

**Believing.** Emphasize core, essential beliefs and don't get drawn into Theological controversies in your sermons. There are three areas of belief Pietists emphasize.

- *Conversion.* Recognizing that we saved by grace, call people to turn ever closer to Christ. Conversion is not only from non-Christian to Christian, but to deeper discipleship.
- *Regeneration.* This is the process of deepening discipleship, and it occupies the lion's share of Pietists' attention. It is the New Birth and New Life that continually grows in us by the work of the Holy Spirit.
- *Transformation/Sanctification.* We participate with God in our regeneration by living increasingly holy lives. We are transformed through a personal relationship with Jesus. Emphasize the person of Jesus, not just the idea of Christ, and the reality of our walk with him.

**Doing.** True Christianity consists of doing not only thinking. Pietistic preaching should emphasize the practical elements of faith. Avoiding moralizing, we know that God is the source of our good works, but we highlight the congruence between what we think and what we do.

**Hoping.** Hope orients our work, directs it to the good ends that God designed for the world. We're setting the stage for God's Kingdom to come more fully into the world. Preach hope-fully, helping the congregation to see the good that's there and the good that will come.



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